

28 March 2023 Tuesday



**DENR**

# **NEWS ALERTS**

# **NEWS CLIPPINGS**

**STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE**



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# Bare plan vs El Niño, senator urges gov't

FROM A1

By Melvin Gascon  
@melvingasconINQ

With the El Niño phenomenon now under way, the government must lay down a "comprehensive" approach in addressing another possible water shortage in the country, Sen. Nancy Binay said on Monday.

Binay, in a statement, said Republic Act No. 6716 or the Rainwater Collector and Springs Development Act, enacted in 1989, laid down the government's "accelerated water supply program."

"We want to find out how many rainwater collection systems have been constructed in the 42,000 barangays in the country, how many are still working, who is in charge of their maintenance, how many are already defective and need to be rehabilitated," she said.

"The government cannot allow itself to be repeatedly blindsided by [each] water shortage that is otherwise foreseeable," she said. "We have been beset with the effects of El Niño for decades and every time the dry season comes, we are often caught by surprise by a water shortage."

"It would be much appreciated if the NWRB (National Water Resources Board) can share its holistic and comprehensive water resource plan, their water allocation and reuse policy down to the [local governments] so that it can be implemented at the community level," said Binay, who also urged consumers to do their part and be "practical" in conserving water.

"El Niño is here, and the food and water crises are real. We cannot afford to go back to a system of lining up for water rations," the senator said.

### 'Maximum heat'

The "hot" weather is expected to prevail in the next few months, the state weather bureau said on Monday.

Earlier, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa) anticipated El Niño to take full effect in the country by July, but it already noted an increase in humidity in Metro Manila and other parts of the country.

"It usually gets this hot in the country whenever it's March, so it's expected that temperatures go high. The maximum heat will be experienced by April and May," said Pagasa weather specialist Dan Villenil.



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**NO BEACH, NO PROBLEM** Children enjoy a dip in an inflatable pool on Pasong Tirad in Makati City in this photo taken last week as the weather bureau declared the beginning of the dry season. Officials have also warned about the impact of El Niño on water supply as the heat index continues to rise in different parts of the country. —**MARIANNE BERMUDEZ**

This condition, he said, is caused by the dry season and the warm wind blowing from the Pacific Ocean.

As of last week, the highest heat index recorded by Pagasa was 47 degrees Celsius on Saturday, as felt in San Jose, Occidental Mindoro, and in Butuan City, Agusan del Norte.

The heat index is the temperature felt by people amid

the combined air temperature and humidity.

Pagasa anticipates that indicator to continue its above-normal rise, from the 40 C to 42 C range in Dagupan City, Pangasinan, to 48 C in General Santos City.

#### Avoid heatstroke

Dagupan experienced its highest heat index of 54.9 C in April last year.

On Monday the heat index in the city peaked at 40 C, said Jose Estrada Jr., head of Pagasa's Dagupan station.

He said that as a coastal city facing the Lingayen Gulf, Dagupan is enduring both the hot seashore surface temperature and humidity.

Dr. Joseph Roland Mejia, chief of Region 1 Medical Center in Dagupan, said his facility had

yet to admit any patient suffering from heatstroke.

But he noted that many experienced hypertension. He discouraged residents from staying outdoors between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. to avoid heatstroke.

#### 'Feels like hell'

In the island province of Bohol, the heat index on Sunday was recorded between 31 C and 42 C.

Joel Oguis, 47, a messenger, said he drank more than a gallon of water every day due to the intense heat so he can stay hydrated.

Many residents went to air-conditioned shopping malls and local beaches to find relief from the heat.

"The heat and humidity is really high... It feels like hell," said Regor Cabalir, a resident of Tagbilaran City, noting that he would drink juice and crunch on ice cubes to cool off.

Pagasa weather specialist Vicente Malano urged the public to take precautionary measures.

"Let us drink a lot of water and avoid going out around afternoon where the sun is high and the heat is severe," he said.

—**WITH REPORTS FROM ABBY BOISER, GERMELINA LACORTE, YOLANDA SOTELO AND LEODUTOMAN INQ**



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## 150-HA ENDEMIC PINE TREES LOST

# FOREST FIRES HIT OCCIDENTAL MINDORO MOUNTAINS

By **Madonna T. Virola**  
@mvirolaINQ

**CITY OF CALAPAN**—Two forest fires razed parts of the mountains of Occidental Mindoro in the last nine days, destroying at least 150 hectares of endemic pine trees and forcing the closure of a popular trekking site in the province, officials said on Monday.

The latest of the two incidents of forest fire struck Mount Susong Dalaga in Barangay Batasan in San Jose town at 5:25 p.m. on March 25 and lasted for about 12 hours, according to the local station of the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP).

Fire investigators said the blaze gutted some 2,000 square meters of Batasan's forest area, and the flames were put out only at 5:30 a.m. on Sunday.

According to the BFP, fire-

fighters had to navigate the steep terrain and cross several rivers to reach the area.

It said the cause of the fire was still under investigation, noting that no one was injured since there were no communities in the area.

In Sablayan town, the local tourism office closed the popular trekking destination locally known as "Little Baguio of Mindoro" following the forest fire that hit the mountainous area between March 17 and March 19.

### Safety reasons

Charlou Ormega, officer in charge of the Sablayan municipal environment office, said the fire destroyed 150 ha (15 million sq m) of forest pines that were endemic to the province and a few areas in the country and Southeast Asia. The affected area traverses the upland villag-

es of Pag-asa and San Agustin.

Ormega said the site was closed to trekkers from March 21 until March 31 for safety reasons.

"The grassy areas and other vegetation on the trail were gone, making the area dangerous due to the steep slope and loose soil," Ormega said in an interview on Monday.

An initial investigation pointed to "kaingin," or slash-and-burn farming, as one of the possible causes, he said.

Citing witnesses, Ormega said the fire could have also been caused by honey gatherers who used fire to drive away bees.

"This happens yearly from March to May or during the summer. The area is far and wide, making it difficult to determine who is responsible [for the forest fire]," he said. no

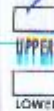
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# REGIONS

**IN FLAMES** A forest fire engulfs parts of the Susong Dalaga Mountain at Barangay Batasan in San Jose, Occidental Mindoro, in this photo taken on March 25. The blaze was the second to hit a forest area of the province in the past nine days and authorities are blaming human activities, such as "kaingin" (slash-and-burn farming), for these incidents. —ARDEKIMMENTAL CONTRIBUTOR



## Group outlines legal liabilities of vessel owner in Mindoro oil spill

BY JONATHAN L. MAYUGA  
@jonlmayuga

**T**HE owner of MT Princess Empress that sank off Naujan, Oriental Mindoro on February 28, 2023, may be facing a slew of criminal, administrative, and possibly civil charges for the massive oil spill that continues to threaten coastal communities in Palawan and Antique and now Batangas.

According to the international nongovernment organization Oceana, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), as an attached agency of the Department of Transportation and Communication, is mandated to develop oil spill response, containment, and recovery capabilities, enforce laws, and promulgate and administer rules and regulations for the protection of marine environment and resources from offshore sources of pollution within the maritime jurisdiction of the Philippines.

However, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is mandated to enforce environmental laws, including Republic Act 9275 or the Clean Water Act.

Sought for a legal opinion, Oceana's vice president Gloria Estenzo-Ramos created a team of legal and environmental experts to respond to queries such as which environmental laws may apply in going after the parties behind the Oriental Mindoro oil spill.

### Clean Water Act applies to oil spills

ACCORDING to Oceana, Clean Water Act also applies to oil spills. "There is nothing in the law which limits its application to effluent discharges. It bears stressing that the law aims to protect and preserve the quality of the country's water resources,

including its marine environment, by regulating the discharge of pollutants, including oil, into bodies of water," Ramos said.

Ramos added discharge, as defined by law, includes the act of spilling, leaking, pumping, pouring, emitting, emptying, releasing or dumping of any material, including oil, into coastal and marine waters without a permit is prohibited.

"In case of an oil spill incident, the responsible party is required to immediately notify the appropriate government agency, which includes the Philippine Coast Guard, and take all necessary measures to contain and clean up the spill," she said.

Moreover, Ramos said under Section 16, any person who causes pollution in or pollutes water bodies, at his own expense, shall undertake cleanup operations to remove pollutants discharged or spilled into the water body and its surrounding areas and shall restore the affected areas to their original state or condition.

In the event emergency cleanup operations are necessary and the polluter fails to immediately undertake the same, the DENR, in coordination with other government agencies concerned, including the PCG, shall conduct containment, removal, and cleanup operations.

However, expenses incurred in said operations shall be reimbursed by the persons found to have caused such pollution.

"Reimbursements of the cost incurred shall be made to the Water Quality Management Fund or to such other funds where said disbursements were sourced," said Oceana. To further reinforce the point that the Clean Water Act applies, Section 28 of the same law defines the penalties for oil spill incidents and other

violations relating to Presidential Decree 979 (Marine Pollution Decree). It states: For violations falling under Section 4 of Presidential Decree No.979 or any regulations prescribed in pursuance thereof, such person shall be liable for a fine of not less than P50,000 or more P1,000,000.00 or by imprisonment of not less than one year nor more than six years or both, for each offense, without prejudice to the civil liability of the offender in accordance with existing laws.

Meanwhile, if the offender is a juridical entity, then its officers, directors, agents or any person primarily responsible shall be held liable: Provided, that any vessel from which oil or other harmful substances are discharged in violation of Sec. 4 of Presidential Decree No.979 shall be liable for a penalty of the fine specified by the law.

"Clearance of such vessel from the port of the Philippines may be withheld until the fine is paid and such penalty shall constitute a lien on the such vessel, which may be recovered in proceedings by ...the proper court...," Oceana said, citing the provision of PD No. 979.

The owner or operator of a vessel or facility that discharged the oil or other harmful substances will be liable to pay for any cleanup costs.

### ENIPAS and Fisheries Code

MEANWHILE, Oceana said while the ENIPAS Act only applies to areas that have been formally set aside and designated as protected areas through a statutory process, the Fisheries Code penalizes aquatic pollution.

"It must be noted that although the penal provisions of the ENIPAS Act is not applicable, as there are no national MPAs (marine protected area) involved, the penal provi-

sions of the Philippines Fisheries Code, as amended, may be used instead since the provisions of the Code is enforceable in all Philippine waters.

"The Code penalizes aquatic pollution, which is defined as the introduction of substances to the aquatic environment which can harm living and non-living aquatic

resources, pose potential and/or real hazard to human health, hindrance to aquatic activities such as fishing and navigation, discharge of petroleum or residual products of petroleum or carbonaceous materials/substances, and other, radioactive, noxious or harmful liquid, gaseous or solid substances," Ramos added.



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SENATOR 'Bong' Go

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SRS

## Go provides support to oil spill victims

Acknowledging the devastating effects of the recent Mindoro oil spill on the environment as well as the lives and livelihood of affected residents, Senator Christopher "Bong" Go on Friday held yet another relief operation for victims in Gloria, Oriental Mindoro, a day after holding a similar activity in

affected residents.

As part of his advocacy to strengthen the health sector, the senator is also set to visit Calapan City and attend the groundbreaking of a Super Health Center, and inspect the Madasakit Center at the Oriental Mindoro Provincial Hospital.

Go will also join the inauguration of a new passenger terminal building today in Calapan City upon the invitation of the Philippine Ports Authority and the LGU.

In line with the senator's unwavering efforts to uplift the lives of affected communities, Go's outreach team will provide aid to other affected municipalities in the coming days.

### Livelihood programs

In line with efforts to create and support more livelihood programs in the country, Go co-sponsored Senate Bill 2021, which aims to institutionalize the Shared Service Facilities project under the Department of Trade and Industry.

"As we all know, micro, small and medium enterprises or MSMEs are considered growth engines of the Philippine economy. Most especially at this time of economic recovery, MSMEs play a crucial role in our development," cited Go in his on-shipment speech on

Wednesday, 22 March.

"However, MSMEs encounter several challenges that hinder their development such as limited financial capacity, poor market information and lack of access to technology. We must therefore strive to enact measures that would help and support our MSMEs. One such measure is the Shared Service Facilities project," he stressed.

The proposed measure seeks to amend Republic Act 8977 or the Magna Carta for Small Enterprises as amended by RA 9504, otherwise known as the Magna Carta for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises.

Meanwhile, Go, last Saturday attended the Gabriel "Flash" Elorde Boxing Awards Banquet of Champions at Okada Manila in Paranaque City where he highlighted the importance of investing in the country's sports development particularly in the grassroots.

The event was held to honor the legacy of the legendary Filipino boxer, Gabriel "Flash" Elorde, and to celebrate the best professional and amateur boxers in the Philippines. Also in attendance was former senator and boxing legend Manny Pacquiao.

In his speech, Go praised Elorde for not only being a legendary boxer but also a source of inspiration for many Filipinos, including himself who continues to advocate for sports and support to athletes.

GM



## Claims office set up for residents affected by oil spill in Or. Mindoro

By Charles Dantes

Princess Empress

ORIENTAL Mindoro Governor Hummerlito Dolor said a claims office has already been established in the region to help residents affected by the oil spill crisis caused by the sunken MT

Dolor announced in a media briefing that four claims processors have arrived in Oriental Mindoro and a physical office in the capitol was set up to cater people filing for compensation.

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### Claims...

From A1

Employees of the capitol will undergo training to further assist the locals in processing of their application, the governor said.

The claims processors will also establish offices in different towns so residents would not have to travel to the capitol to file their claims.

A claims officer said that on Friday, the first established office will be open to the public and will be ready to accept forms for claiming insurance.

Residents who will file for compensation will need to bring a government ID, while registered fishermen, fish vendors, boat owners, tourism-related business owners are asked to bring in

their registration papers.

Dolor said registered fisherfolks are the top priority in claiming insurance.

A claims officer explained that everyone can file for compensation as long as they are legitimate claimants with the right forms and requirements.

A claims officer said that it is possible that a claim could be processed in 30 days but there is no definite time on when claimants will receive compensation.

The officer assured Dolor that progress will be made in three months.

The officers said that for residents to claim their compensation, they will need to sign an agreement that they will not pursue a case against the tanker.

The officers also clarified that the agreement is not a form of bribery but rather a choice for an

amicable settlement.

There are more than 170,000 people affected by the crisis, with over 13,000 fisherfolks as reported by the government.

Meanwhile, more than 9,000 liters of oily water mixture have been collected by the Philippine Coast Guard during its offshore oil spill response.

In a statement released on Monday, PCG said that more than 900 liters of oily water mixture was collected on March 26, bringing the total collected contaminated mixture to 9,463 liters and 115 sacks of contaminated materials in its offshore clean-up efforts.

The ill-fated tanker was carrying 800,000 industrial fuel when it sank off the waters of Oriental Mindoro on February 28.



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# Spill cleanup nets over 9,000 liters of oil sludge in Oriental Mindoro

## More foreign experts joining PCG ops; church group urges gov't to address needs of 34,000 families

By Madonna T. Virola,  
Francis Mangosing  
and Delfin T. Mallari Jr.  
@Team\_Inquirer

CITY OF CALAPAN—At least 9,463 liters of oily water mixture and 115 sacks of oil-contaminated materials were collected by the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) during its offshore cleanup in the province of Oriental Mindoro this month.

In a report on Monday, the PCG said it also managed to collect 137 more sacks of oil-contaminated materials on March 26, resulting in a total of 3,514 sacks and 22 drums of waste collected from 13 affected villages in the towns of Nangan, Bulalacao and Pola from March 1 to March 26.

These areas continued to reel from the spread of industrial fuel

that leaked from the sunken MT Princess Empress that was found in the waters off Pola.

Authorities, however, were yet to determine how much of the 800,000 liters of industrial-grade oil that the tanker was carrying had ended up in the sea when MT Princess Empress sank in the waters off Nangan town on Feb. 18.

Oriental Mindoro has been placed under a state of calamity after coastal waters in 10 towns were drenched in oil slick, displacing over 34,000 families composed mostly of fisherfolk who were barred from fishing.

### Foreign assistance

The slick has since spread to the waters of the capital city of Calapan, Caluya Island in Antique, the waters of Agutaya and Taytay towns in Palawan



INSPECTION French experts have joined a team from the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) in testing water samples gathered from the shoreline of Pola town in Oriental Mindoro to measure the level of oil contamination from sunken tanker MT Princess Empress, in this photo posted on the PCG Facebook on March 26. —PHOTO COURTESY OF PCG

province, the sea off Verde Island in Batangas City and Tingloy town in Batangas province although authorities said the impact in these areas were not

as bad as those in Nangan, Pola and their adjoining towns.

Technical experts from the Korean Coast Guard will meet with the PCG on Tuesday to lend

their expertise on oil spill response operations, the PCG said.

The South Korean government will also be providing 20 tons of sorbent pads and 2,000 meters of solid flotation curtain boom, and 2,000 sets of personal protective equipment.

"This is the first time Korea has provided assistance for the prevention of marine pollution, and Korea highly values the importance of remedying areas affected by environmental disasters and accidents," the Korean Embassy in Manila said.

At present, the PCG has been getting help from local communities that provide them with improvised oil spill booms, using abaca cuir and such items as plastic barrels.

More assistance from the US Coast Guard was also ex-

pected to arrive in the coming days, acting Defense Secretary Carlo Galvez Jr. said.

"We are looking forward to the arrival of the entire US Coast Guard contingent for the additional technical support in our disaster response operations. Although, one US C-17 with equipment (60k loader) already arrived this morning and is now at Subic Air Base. Another C-5 is expected to arrive tomorrow," Galvez said in a report to President Marcos on Sunday.

"We will immediately employ these assets and integrate in our response operations. In addition, we continue to closely monitor the RVN's (remotely operated vehicle) operations for significant updates and to further determine the extent of the oil spill," he said. [pic](#)





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## PCG clean-up of oil spill yields 9K liters of oily water

BY VICTOR REYES

NEARLY 9,000 liters of oily water mixture have been recovered by the Philippine Coast Guard in its offshore clean-up of the oil spill caused by the February 28 sinking of M/V Princess Empress off Oriental Mindoro.

In a statement, the PCG said 145 sacks of oil-contaminated materials were also collected during its offshore oil spill response operations from March 1 to March 26.

Last Sunday, the PCG said 137 sacks of oil-contaminated materials were also collected during its coastal clean-up.

This brought to 3,514.5 sacks and 22 drums of waste collected in 13 affected barangays in the towns of Naujan, Bulalacao and Pola from March 1 to 26, the PCG said.

Pala Mayor Jennifer Cruz said the amount of oil reaching the shoreline of Pola has decreased.

"It's unlike before when you can see large tarballs in our shores. Right now, they're already small. Maybe they are being dispersed by the Coast Guard offshore," said Cruz.

Cruz added the coastal cleanup will take a while, especially in mangrove areas.

She said the coastlines of five barangays are still affected by the oil spill, adding cleanup works are still ongoing.

She said the coastlines of six other barangays that have been cleared of oil are under observation.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development

See BCG > Page B2

## PCG

(DSWD) is working on extending the cash for work program to 45 days from the current 15 days to help sustain the livelihood of those affected by the oil spill.

The DSWD said it is now finalizing the budgetary requirements for the extension.

The initial fund for the CFW was sourced from the Department's Quick Response Fund.

The DSWD said 19,895 people from Oriental Mindoro and Antique, mostly fishermen, who were affected by the oil spill have availed of the program.

The department has already released over P3.1 million for the wages of the beneficiaries.

The beneficiaries, who were identified by their local government units (LGUs), were tasked to collect locally available materials for making improvised oil spill boom and absorbent; establish barangay or backyard gardens; engage in mangrove rehabilitation; conduct community clean-up drives; and assist in the loading and unloading of family food packs (FFP).

The beneficiaries were paid amounts equivalent to the daily regional minimum wage in their region and were also provided basic necessities such as food, and water, among others.

Those from Oriental Mindoro received P355 per day while those from Antique got P450 per day.

The DSWD said it will also conduct cash-for-work activities in Batangas as soon as the funds for its implementation is available.

The CFW in Batangas aims to hire 2,000 people who will initially work for 15 days.

The program aims to help mitigate the effects of the oil spill that has reached Batangas City, and the towns of Mabini, Bataan, Lobo, San Luis, San Pascual, and Tingloy, and is now also threatening the Verde Island Passage - *With*

Jacelyn Montemayor



## Oil spill response raised to highest level – PCG

By MARTIN SADONGDONG

The oil spill response in Oriental Mindoro has been elevated to "Tier 3," the highest level under the Philippine Coast Guard's (PCG) National Oil Spill Contingency Plan (NOSCP), as "bagging" operation to contain the leakage is expected to start this week.

Admiral Artemio Abu, PCG commandant, said raising the response to the highest level would further intensify the coordination of national and local government agencies as well as the international community in containing the oil spill.

"Dineclare natin na it's a Tier 3 response, in-elevate natin. In the beginning, Tier 2 tayo because the volume of the oil was below one million [liters] (We declared Tier 3 response now, we elevated it. In the beginning, we only placed it under Tier 2 because the volume of oil was below one million)," Abu said.

"Tapos nakita natin dumaraming na 'yung assistance from neighboring countries so in-elevate natin sa Tier 3. Mas maganda 'yun para mas lalong mapapigting ang koordinasyon, communication, and support of other countries (Then came the assistance from neighboring countries, so we elevated it ► 6

## Oil spill response raised to highest level – PCG ◀

to Tier 3. It's much better because we can intensify coordination, communication, and support of other countries," he added.

In the event of an oil spill, the PCG follows the NOSCP "to provide a coordinated and integrated response mechanism" for its cleanup efforts. The level of response is referred to as "tiers" which vary depending on the magnitude of the oil spill. The volume of spilt oil corresponds to the tiers: Tier 1 is implemented if the spill involves one liter to 10,000 liters, Tier 2 for 10,001 liters to one million liters, and Tier 3 for more than one million liters.

According to the NOSCP, a Tier 1 response is for oil spill that is generally small in magnitude and affecting only a local area, which means it may be dealt with by the individual operator or "spiller."

Under a Tier 2 spill, the response extends outside the limit of the Tier 1 response as it is larger in magnitude and "needs additional resources from a variety of potential sources from stakeholders involved."

The highest level, Tier 3, is for a spill that calls for further substantial resources from a range of national and international response due to its scale and likelihood to cause major impacts.

Vice Admiral Rolando Lizon Punzalan Jr., PCG deputy commandant for operations and head of the Crisis Management Committee, said the "most effective" method to drain the leaking oil from sunken motor tanker (MT) Princess Empress is through bagging operation. The vessel capsized on Feb. 28 off Naujan, Oriental Mindoro while carrying 800,000 liters of industrial fuel oil.

Through this method, a specialized bag will be used to cover the ship and catch the leaking oil from the 23 cracks found on the vessel's surface, Punzalan explained.

"May bag na ipapatong sa kanya nang sa gayon, ang langis ay mahuhuli ng bag na ito. Habang napupuno, unti-unti ring lumalabas ang tubig-dagat (It [vessel] will be covered by a bag, which will catch the oil. As it is being filled, the sea water will slowly come out)," he said.

Punzalan said the bagging operation might start this week as the P&I (Protection and Indemnity) Club, the insurance company of the owner of the MT Princess Empress, RDC Releld Marine Services, Inc., has started acquiring the specialized bags from its source.

Aside from bagging operation, the PCG is also waiting for the availability of a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) or an underwater robot that could siphon the oil leaks.

The PCG previously said the United States Coast Guard has offered an ROV, which is capable of draining leaking fuel, from the US Marines.

### Cash-for-work

Meanwhile, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) provided cash-for-work assistance to some 19,000 residents affected by the oil spill.

As of March 27, 19,895 individuals in Oriental Mindoro and Antique benefitted from the cash-for-work program of the DSWD, which aims to provide temporary employment to families, mostly fisherfolk, who lost their source of livelihood due to the oil spill. (With a report from Ellalyn de Vera-Ruiz)



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## Sunken *Empress'* owner faces NBI

The owner of the oil vessel *M/V Princess Empress* has presented himself to the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI).

Reymundo Cabial, owner of the RDC Reield Marine Services, appeared before the NBI-Environmental Crime Division yesterday afternoon.

This developed after the Environmental Crime Division issued a subpoena to the owner and crewmembers of the *Empress*.

The RDC Reield Marine Services owns the *Empress*, which sank last month in the waters off Naujan town in Oriental Mindoro.

The incident caused a massive oil spill that has affected not only the coast of Oriental Mindoro, but also of Antique and Palawan as well as Batangas including the Verde Island Passage, which serves as home to a vast species of marine life including whale sharks, sea turtles and corals.

Last Friday, the NBI summoned the 15 crewmembers of the *Empress* including the captain and their lawyers.

The crewmembers will be considered as "persons of interest" pending investigation of the maritime accident.

Meanwhile, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) will receive a donation of 180,000 sheets of absorbent fiber and 11 drums that will be used in the ongoing cleanup of the oil spill.

The PCG said private firm Next-Gen and non-government organization Oceans Conservation pledged to donate absorbent pads and an all-natural fuel dispersant that would help separate oil from water for easy removal.

The donations are expected to be turned over today to officials of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources as well as to Commodore Ceronimo Tuvilla, who heads the PCG oil spill incident management team in Oriental Mindoro.

The PCG thanked Eco Trends International for supporting the government's ongoing oil spill response operations in Oriental Mindoro.

Eco Trends pledged to donate three 40-footer shipping containers of microfiber absorbent pads.

The PCG said it would use specialized bags to collect the leaking oil from the *Empress*.

Vice Admiral Rolando Punzalan Jr., PCG deputy commandant for administration, said these specialized bags are the easiest and fastest devices for cleaning up the spill.

The bags are expected to arrive from Singapore on Thursday.

Punzalan said the specialized bags would catch the oil leaking from the tanker.

He said the insurance firm hired by the vessel owner committed to provide the bags needed for the oil spill cleanup. — Mark Ernest Villeza, Evelyn Macairan



# Focus on sea disaster prevention that's scientific, Philippines told

By Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza  
Reporter

THE GOVERNMENT of Philippine President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. should develop a people-centered and preventive approach to marine disasters as part of a bigger plan to harness the ocean economy, scientists said.

The Philippines, just like many coastal states, "does not have the capability to respond to marine disasters such as a massive oil spill," Rhodora V. Azanza, who heads the ASEAN Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation's marine science and technology sub-committee, said in an e-mail.

The government had always focused on disaster response rather than on prevention, she said, adding that it has failed to develop a marine disaster prevention system that is scientific and innovative.

"It should be the concern particularly of countries that depend on the coasts and seas for the survival of many of their communities and the potential development of their blue economy such as the Philippine archipelago with its vast marine resources," said Ms. Azanza, who is also professor emerita at the University of the Philippines (UP) Marine Science Institute.

Philippine authorities have been scrambling to contain an oil spill from a sunken fuel tanker that has affected many coastal areas, including a world-renowned passage where charismatic marine species could be found.

The Philippine Coast Guard on Monday said it collected 900 liters of oily water mixture during its Sunday offshore response operations, bringing the total from Mar. 1 to 26 to 9,463 liters.

For shoreline response, the agency collected 137 sacks of oil-contaminated materials on Sunday, resulting in 3,514.5 sacks and 22 drums of waste collected from 13 affected villages in the towns of Naujan, Bulalacao and Pola in Oriental Mindoro from Mar. 1 to 26, it said in a statement.



THE PHILIPPINE Coast Guard on Monday said it collected 900 liters of oily water mixture during its Sunday offshore response operations, bringing the total from Mar. 1 to 26 to 9,463 liters.

In its latest report, the UP Marine Science Institute said easterlies or winds coming from the east might blow the slick from the sunken vessel to the west through the Verde Island Passage.

The strait is just 12 kilometers away from Puerto Galera, a popular beach and diving destination in Oriental Mindoro province. The town is still oil spill-free, at least for now.

"The majority of our people rely on the tourism industry for their livelihood," Christian Manalo, a diver and member of Puerto Galera's tourism sector, said in a Facebook Messenger chat. "If the oil spill reaches our dive spots, it will have significant and long-lasting consequences both for the environment and the people."

The UP-MSI, which has been closely monitoring the oil spill's movement, earlier said the oil spill might reach Puerto Galera — something that has angered Mayor Rocky D. Ilagan after trips to his town got canceled.

"We have a lot of tourist cancellations because of what MSI did," he told a news briefing last week. "They should be responsible with their statements and think about people's livelihood because, in actuality, the oil spill has not reached us."

The UP-MSI has been releasing projections to encourage local governments to prepare in case the oil spill reaches their shores.

Community empowerment should be at the heart of any marine disaster prevention programs, said Jayvee Abila Saco, president of the Philippine Association of Marine Science. "We need to equip local government units (LGUs) and people's organizations because they are on the frontlines," he said in a Zoom interview.

## 'SCIENCE-BASED'

He said civic groups in coastal communities have "very organized" mechanisms. "They are in their communities and they have a sense of ownership of their communities. We need to invest more in our local government units and people's organizations."

"If we will equip them with proper training and capacity building, we would be able to deal better with environmental risks," he added.

Mr. Saco said marine disaster preparation should consider the status of the Philippines' scientific community, whose members are leaving the country for better opportunities and higher pay overseas.

Marine disasters are nothing new to the Philippines, which was also hit by an oil spill in 2006 after a motor tanker carrying more than two million liters of bunker fuel sank off the coast of Guimaras Island in central Philippines.

Ms. Azanza said the Philippines should work with South-

east Asian neighbors and look at existing treaties or agreements to address marine disasters. "The International Maritime Organization has policies concerning oil spill management, with focus on response and recovery mechanisms," she said.

She said the recently approved United Nations agreement on the protection of the high seas could be used to develop specific policies on cooperative research and development, planning and response to major marine disasters such as oil spills.

"The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which is now developing a regional road map for the blue economy, should consider these topics to have strategic regional cooperation on marine disaster management based on science, technology and innovation, considering prevention, mitigation and response schemes," she added.

During his presidential campaign last year, Mr. Marcos promised to develop the maritime sector by making the Philippines a logistics hub and harnessing the country's sea resources.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has said 80-90% of global trade is shipped by sea.

Experts said developing the maritime industry should be in line with the demands of a blue or ocean economy, which Mr. Marcos included in his economic agenda during his campaign.

The blue economy calls for the "sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, while preserving the health of the ocean ecosystem," according to the World Bank.

"A modern local maritime industry should develop and implement a science and technology-based marine disaster management program that considers prevention, mitigation and recovery aspects," Ms. Azanza said. "Good governance of institutions or agencies involved in the strategic program is a must."



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## A crude awakening

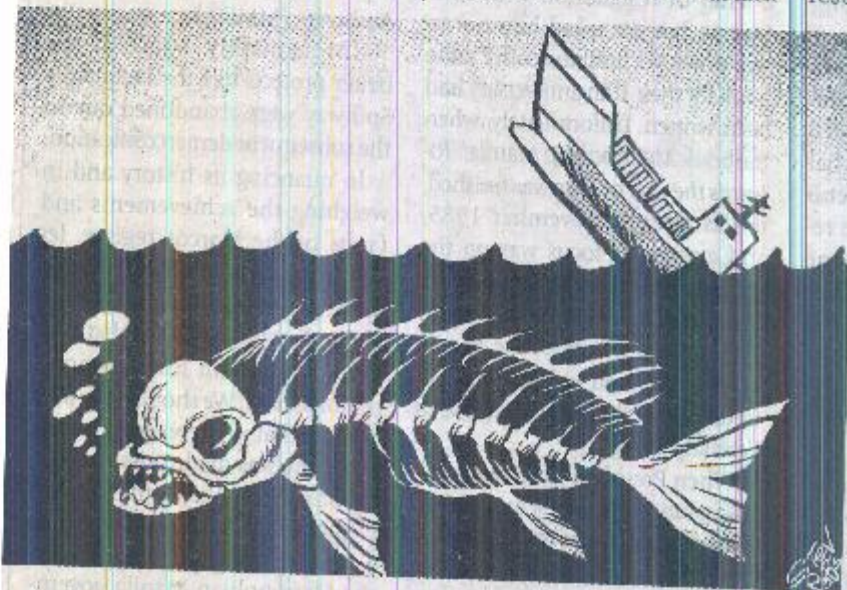
mess. If not for Petron "overloading the vessel that contributed heavily to the sinking of the ship," if not for Capt. Norberto Aguro's operation of the vessel despite having inadequate training, and if not for its owners' non-compliance with policies and requirements to ensure the seaworthiness of their vessel — perhaps the spill would

In another blatant disregard for sea policies, Marina claims that they did not issue any amendment to the certificate of public convenience (CPC) of the vessel's owner. This means the MT Princess Empress should not have been sailing at all — especially with a deadly cargo.

It is hard not to think that lack

and coastal waters of 266,000 km, the Philippines must have ever-evolving systems and mechanisms for strict regulation, readiness, risk mitigation and prevention of disasters like this in order to veer away from constantly scrambling for response.

This problem may not be resolved quickly. The public's attention is welcome. But more than finding a scapegoat, we must fix how we govern. It is not too late to prevent the likelihood of a reprise of this incident by making sense of all the data we have gathered so far and not maligning scientists for speaking evidence-based facts and forecasts. I am reminded of Yuval Harari's advice that when there is a deluge of information, "clarity is power." The author of *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* reminds us of the importance of the four Cs



not have occurred.

As investigations into the MT Princess Empress reveal, a similar story of "if not for" is happening. According to Justice Secretary Boying Remulla, this vessel was a rebuilt scrap and was not intended to transport oil from the very beginning — though Maritime Industry Authority (Marina) Administrator Hernani Fabia is apparently saying otherwise

of coordination, corruption, incompetence and neglect are often at the core of all these preventable disasters. It seems we did not bother learning from history.

One would think that, after the Guimaras fiasco, we would have stricter rules and regulations already in place to avoid such an incident from ever happening again. As an archipelago with a coastline of 18,000 kilometers

in pedagogy: critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. "Most important of all, will be the ability to deal with change, learn new things, and preserve your mental balance in unfamiliar situations." That is the responsibility of all sectors involved.

I can only hope that the Oriental Mindoro oil spill will be the last rude awakening for all of us.



# A crude awakening

**M**OST of us are following the me-



ORLY?

**ORLANDO MERCADO**

dia coverage of a slow-moving disaster: the Oriental Mindoro oil spill. My attention was drawn to an appeal by Puerto Galera Mayor Rocky Ilagan to the University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute (UP-MSI). He asks that the UP-MSI be "responsible" in their projections, as they were driving away tourists bound for their beaches. **> Mercado A12**

The peak season is already starting after all, and the locals are already anticipating the flock of customers in their towns. The institute, for its part, maintains that their projections are meant to help local government units prepare, and not be scared. Both sides have a point.

The fast facts tell us that the MT Princess Empress was supposed to carry 900,000 liters (240,000 gallons) of industrial fuel or black oil from St. Gas Harbor Terminal in Bataan to Iloilo. However, adverse sea conditions caused it to sink last Feb. 28, 2023. So now, its highly toxic cargo has been set loose, forming slicks in the sea and accumulating sludge on nearby shores.

Unfortunately, due to water movement and weather conditions, this deadly oil is bound to spread to nearby areas such as Batangas, Mimaropa and Western Visayas. And true enough, there are already reports about oil being detected in the Verde Island Passage. This is especially heartbreaking, as it is a world center of marine biodiversity that is also being pushed by various groups to vie for Unesco World Heritage Sites selection. Last March 23, the Philippine Coast Guard elevated its response to Tier 3, the highest, which requires national-level response and support from the international community.

It feels like yesterday when the

Guimaras oil spill happened. It was in 2005 when the oil tanker MT Solar 1 spilled more than 2.1 million liters of bunker fuel into the waters and shores of the island. The tragic incident made it into history books as the worst oil spill in the Philippines. At that time, authorities said that the cleanup might take three years. About 20,000 fisherfolk had to stop relying on the only livelihood they had known, not counting the other families which also relied on nature's bounty for everyday needs, and the animals and plants that were severely afflicted.

Thirteen years later, through strong will and great effort, Guimaras is finding itself back on its feet. Yet here we are again, 17 years after and just 300 kilometers away from the previous incident's site, another toxin-bearing tanker sinks into the sea.

Are we to expect the ecological recovery from the oil spill caused by MT Princess Empress to take more than a decade, too?

More importantly, are we perpetually left to deal with problems in the long haul when these incidents could have been prevented in the first place?

Take, for instance, the case of MT Solar 1. The government probe held the owners, the skipper, maritime officials, and even Petron Corp. culpable for this ecological



STRATEGIC  
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THE EXPONENT OF THE PHILIPPINE PROGRESS SINCE 1900  
**MANILA BULLETIN**  
THE NATION'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

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## Putting a 'tight lid' on oil spills

**T**oday marks one month of the oil spill disaster and it seems that the worst is far from over.

M/T Princess Empress, carrying about 800,000 liters of industrial fuel oil, capsized off Naujan in Oriental Mindoro last Feb. 28, 2023. Spilling thick oil into the sea, it was a tragic disaster that threatened not only the teeming marine life in the area but also the coastal communities whose livelihoods are intertwined with the bounty of the waters.

As the clock continues to tick away, various groups and concerned agencies called on the government to fast-track containment and cleanup efforts. Environment groups warned that the oil could soon reach the protected Verde Island Passage — considered the “center of the center of biodiversity.” Industrial oil reaching this area would be an environmental crisis of epic proportions, one that could overturn years of protection and preservation.

Different governments around the world, such as the US, South Korea, Japan, etc., have expressed support to contain this maritime disaster and the rehabilitation that would ensue. For example, South Korea is sending today its Korean Coast Guard Response Team and technical experts. It has also pledged to ship 20 tons of absorbent pads, 2,000 sets of protective equipment, and a 1,000-meter spill boom.

On the other hand, the United States Coast Guard and some of its air assets will assist in the ongoing cleanup operations. Carlito Galvez Jr., OIC of the Department of National Defense (DND), noted that the presence of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has “considerably helped in the cleanup operations by providing rapid environmental assessments of the

affected areas, identification of priority areas at risk of environmental damage, and assessment of the needs for ecosystem restoration.”

Meanwhile, last March 21, a Japanese ROV (remotely operated vehicle) found the oil tanker and sent images showing that the ship “suffered structural damage after sinking.” It was found 7.7 nautical miles from Balingawan Point in Naujan.

Finding the location of the oil tanker is good news, but there's nothing to celebrate here. There are conflicting reports on the “health” of the ship, contradictory claims on the ship's provenance, to different data on the scope of the oil spill damage. Setting aside the noise, there is one thing we can all agree on — this is a wake up call.

For one, there is a need for the government to invest in technology and improve response protocols when a similar incident like this would happen in the future. We couldn't call for the ban on these oil tankers as we are an archipelagic nation.

Environmental science professor from the Mindanao State University Hernando Bacosa said that the “government should draw lessons from the oil spill that has affected 12 towns and other provinces so far.” “We have to invest in technology, we have to invest in an ROV... we have to organize ourselves as a strong force to respond to an oil spill,” he said.

The sunken M/T Princess Empress just showed that “the country lacks the technological capability to seal the leaking tanks.”

This oil spill is, sadly, emblematic of the failures in our compliance standards. Though we can't rule out accidents happening on our seas, the least the government could do is to make sure each ship is voyage-worthy — for the protection of people, of communities, and most of all, our marine treasures.



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THE EXPONENT OF PHILIPPINE PROGRESS  
SINCE 1900  
**MANILA BULLETIN**  
THE NATION'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

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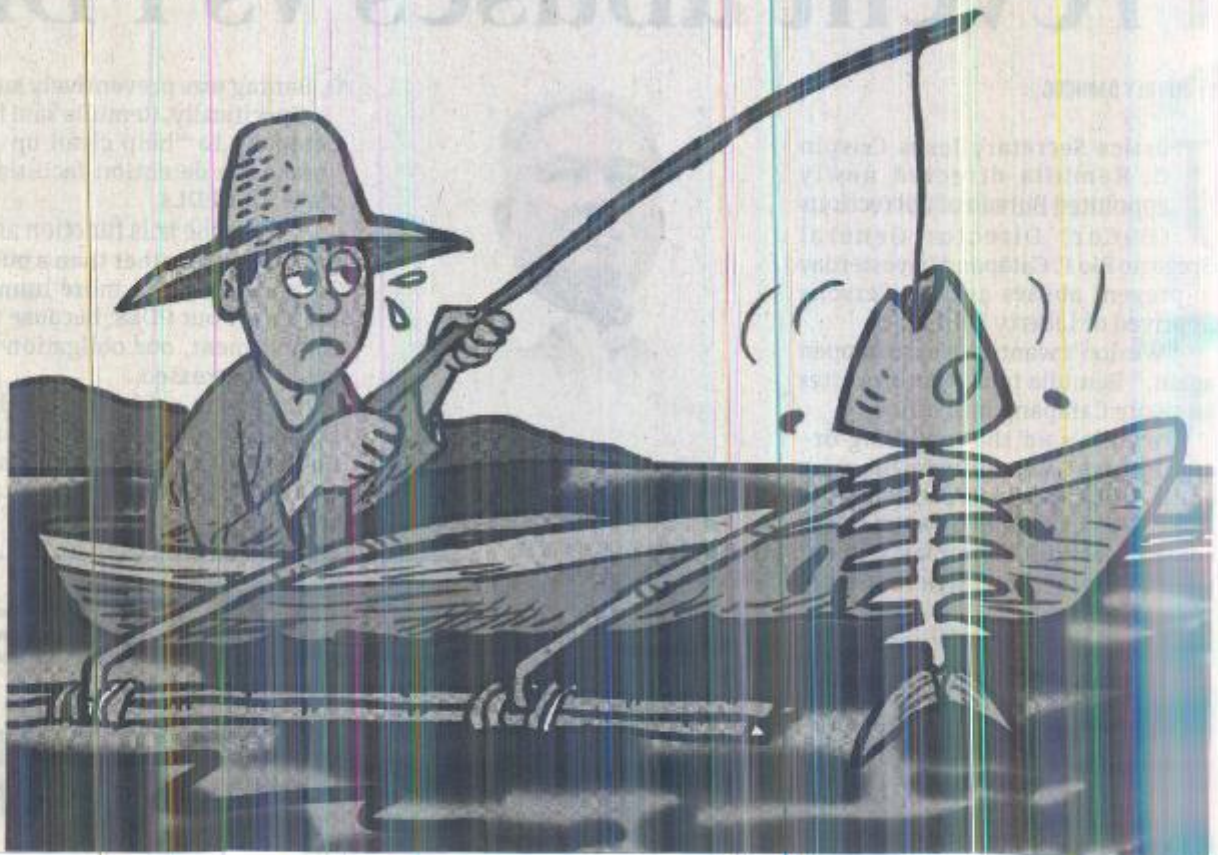
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4 **MANILA BULLETIN**

**Editorial**

Tuesday, March 28, 2023

*Loni San Diego*  
MANILA BULLETIN  
MARCH 28, 2023







## Destroyed habitat, lifelong recovery

THE Philippines is an archipelago with a coastline that stretches more than 18,000 kilometers. Its coastal waters cover an area of 266,000 square kilometers where 70 percent of its 1,489 municipalities are in the coastal area. It is the fourth longest coastline in the world. It is home to millions of people for whom the sea is part and parcel of their lives. Imagine the impact of an oil spill!

This summer will be bad for the beaches and the fisherfolk in Oriental Mindoro, an island province, which covers a total area of 4,238.38 sq km (1,636.45 sq mi). It is the seventh largest island in the country and the eighth most populous island in the Philippines, with 908,339 population, per the 2020 census. The province was the second largest economy in the Mimaropa region from 2018 to 2020. "The economy of Oriental Mindoro is driven by services, which accounted for more than half of the province's total economic output with an annual average share of 50.4 percent from 2018 to 2020. It was followed by industry with 33.6 percent share, and agriculture, forestry and fishing at 16 percent share."

The main sources of income



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for Oriental Mindoro are agriculture and fishing, except for Puerto Galera, which relies heavily on tourism. Rice farming is highest in Naujan followed by Calapan, with irrigated areas covering 11,348 hectares and 7,043 hectares, respectively.

An oil spill will therefore affect lives that rely on fishing and tourism, as well as the health of residents that live near the shores of areas affected by an oil spill, which does not remain static principally due to the nature of waves. Most kinds of oil are less dense than water, and most spilled oil floats on the water's surface. It spreads out and is pushed across the water by wind and currents.

The cost of an oil spill is considerable in both economic and ecological terms. "Oil on ocean surfaces is harmful to many forms of aquatic life because it prevents enough sunlight from penetrating the surface, and it also reduces the level of dissolved oxygen,

Crude oil ruins the insulating and waterproofing properties of feathers and fur, and thus oil-coated birds and marine mammals may die from hypothermia. Moreover, ingested oil can be toxic to affected animals, and damage to their habitat and reproductive rate may slow the long-term recovery of animal populations from the short-term damage caused by the spill itself. Damage to plant life can be considerable as well: salt-water marshes and mangroves are two notable shore ecosystems that frequently suffer from oil spills. If beaches and populated shorelines are fouled, tourism and commerce may be severely affected, as may power plants and other utilities that either draw on or discharge into seawater at the shore. One of the industries most affected by oil spills is fishing. Major oil spills are frequently followed by the immediate suspension of commercial fishing, at the least to prevent damage to vessels and equipment but also to prevent the catch and sale of fish or shellfish that may be contaminated."

With the history of oil spills in the country (14 major ones), the immediate environmental effects have been readily identified, but

their long-term impact on the ecological system of an affected area is more difficult to assess. The cost of paying compensation to individuals and communities damaged by oil spills has been a major incentive to reduce the chances of such events taking place in the future. Would a class suit be the right approach to secure the short-term gain for those dislocated and the long-term solution for recovery?

To date, a total of 172,928 individuals have been affected by the oil spill from the sunken MT Princess Empress carrying 800,000 liters of industrial fuel. It is initially estimated that "20,000 hectares of coral reef, 9,900 hectares of mangroves and 6,000 hectares of seagrass may be affected by the oil slick in the earlier identified three municipalities." By March 14, the spill had reached 14 municipalities and one city in Oriental Mindoro; two municipalities in Occidental Mindoro; five municipalities in Palawan; and one in Antique.

As yet, no thoroughly satisfactory method has been developed for cleaning up major oil spills, though the spectacular spills of the last decades of the 20th century "called

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### TIQUIA FROM A10

## Destroyed habitat

forth great improvements in technology and in the management of coordinated responses. Essentially, responses to oil spills seek to contain the oil and remove enough of it so that economic activity can resume and the natural recovery processes of the marine environment can take over. Floating booms can be placed around the source of the spill or at entrances to channels and harbors to reduce the spreading of an oil slick over the sea surface. Skimming, a technique that, like the use of booms, is most effective in calm waters, involves various mechanisms that physically separate the oil from the water and place the oil into collection tanks. Another approach is to use various sorbents (e.g., straw, volcanic ash and shavings of polyester-derived plastic) that absorb the oil from the water. Where appropriate,

chemical surfactants and solvents may be spread over a slick in order to accelerate its natural dispersion into the sea. Onshore removal of oil that has penetrated sandy beaches and coated rocky shores is a laborious affair, frequently involving small armies of workers wielding hand tools or operating heavy construction-type equipment to scrape up contaminated debris and haul it away."

And we are not even talking of the liabilities of the MT Princess Empress and the highly irregular enforcement of maritime laws on safety, environmental protection and security by the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and Marina on the development, promotion and regulation of the maritime industry. No heads rolled even while anomalies were being unearthed as the congressional bodies conducted their investigations. Transparency and accountability seem to be new words for the PCG. We are truly in a sad state when it comes to enforcement. Either regulatory agencies do not enforce laws or would go

beyond what laws mandate, just like the Bureau of Immigration and Deportation.

And nobody is even looking at the Oil Pollution Management Fund created under Republic Act 9483, or the "Oil Pollution Compensation Act of 2007," to get things settled and move to enhanced recovery, mindful of the lives affected by the spill. The saga of the Princess Empress essentially proves to all that, "It's not a matter of if there will be an oil spill, it's when."



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# Mysteries that confound

**“**What puzzled the industry source was the utter lack of due diligence among the companies involved in the oil shipment, both the charterer and the insurer.

Under the law, the insurance cover on oil tanker *MT Princess Empress* will be used to reimburse the government for all expenses incurred in responding to the Mindoro oil spill, including compensating victims and financing programs to mitigate the environmental impact of the spread of the toxic substance.

According to church group Stella Maris-Philippines, compensation should immediately be available to support the livelihood of local fishermen.

“For the time being, programs can be implemented to train them in acquiring new skills that they can use to earn a living until the condition is safe for them to go back to fishing,” Stella Marris said in a statement.

The premise is that RDC Reield Marine Services has full coverage to the extent of \$1 billion, which was the amount revealed by the Maritime Industry Authority during a Senate public hearing.

The amount, however, is not cast in stone as a long process of investigation, which may take years, follows.

The real prospect is that the insurance policy may not even apply due to the deficient papers of the vessel owner.

According to an industry source, the local Protection and Indemnity Club insurer is Shipowners Mutual, while the Manila broker is Gordon & Associates, which is fully owned by a businessman named Alfred Gordon.

What puzzled the industry source was the utter lack of due diligence among the companies involved in the oil shipment, both the charterer and the insurer.

“The insurer should have conducted due diligence on the certificate of public convenience of the tanker,” according to the source.

“The insurance commissioner must ask the P&I Club if an insurance cover is in effect,” the source wanted to know.

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DAILY TRIBUNE





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Mysteries

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“  
*Another  
mystery  
was how the  
vessel owner  
clinched the  
insurance  
coverage  
despite the  
incomplete  
documents  
of the  
tanker.*

The government should learn the whole gamut of the insurance coverage since “if not, who will compensate those who suffered and pay the cost of cleaning up.”

The insurer had set yesterday, 27 March, for the start of listing of the victims seeking compensation, but the source said this is not a guarantee of payment.

At the Senate hearing, an RDC Reield official admitted the tanker had sailed nine times without an amended Certificate of Public Convenience, which Marina said is a requirement.

The maritime expert said the absence of a completed license will result in a serious problem with the insurer.

“This may be a ground for denying the claim,” the source noted.

“The Club that reinsured and other insurance companies may question the validity of claims, especially in this case as claims will be big,” the industry veteran indicated.

“If the papers of the tanker are not in order, the Protection and Indemnity insurance coverage of the tanker will have no effect and the liability for any damage or recovery will not be shouldered by their P&I Club,” the source described the grim prospect ahead.

Senators were baffled at how the tanker was able to evade Philippine Coast Guard checks when the MT Princess Empress left port nine times.

Another mystery was how the vessel owner clinched the insurance coverage despite the incomplete documents of the tanker.

There is then the question about the charterer, which is the shipping unit of conglomerate San Miguel Corp.

“One should wonder why SMC would deal with a company that trades using incomplete certificates,” the source said.

The questions should be answered and the mysteries cleared by the personalities involved in the shipment, including SMC officials.



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# Banking on charity



BY TRIBUNE STAFF

While keeping its silence in the oil spill despite owning the payload in the downed tanker, conglomerate San Miguel Corp. has extended monthly cash assistance to close to 2,000 Cavite beneficiaries

A corporate giant suffers from philanthropic confusion when it, through much media fanfare, farmed out P5,000 monthly assistance to fishermen and their families but not in the oil-slick stricken Oriental Mindoro.

It could have been something to emulate had the generosity in Cavite been extended to the victims of the toxic fuel that seeped out of the sunken *MT Princess Empress*.

While keeping its silence in the oil spill despite owning the payload in the downed tanker, conglomerate San Miguel Corp. has extended monthly cash assistance to close to 2,000 Cavite beneficiaries.

SMC said it is distributing P500 million in "Handog Tulong Pinansyal Para sa Mangingisda" program in the province of Cavite.



## Airport megaproject

SMC's Aerocity Inc., SMC's airport unit, launched the financial assistance program as a follow-up to the company's monthly food supply initiative for over 8,000 fisherfolk families from Rosario, Tanza, Naic and Ternate towns.

The irony is that in a different part of the country, SMC is completely silent on the cries from the Oriental Mindoro and Batangas residents who are reeling from the effects of the slick engulfing an increasing part of the nation.

Church leaders of 86 diocesan social action centers in the Philippines are frantically raising their hands to heaven for assistance.

"We are saddened by the damage inflicted on God's creation by the oil spill from the sinking of *MT Princess Empress* on 28 February 2023, as 900,000 liters of industrial oil now pollutes the waters of the Verde Island Passage," they said.

Over 2 million Filipinos depend on the bounty of the seas threatened by the spreading oil from the sunken ship. Their food, livelihood, and future are in peril, according to the Social Action Network.

The group said the government should exhaust all efforts to contain the spill and "ensure that those responsible for this catastrophe be held accountable under our laws."

The bishops lamented that through no fault of theirs, the residents of the affected areas are now exposed to loss of income, health risks, and environmental degradation.

The support should come from both the government and the companies who own the vessel and the fuel it carried.

"Our seas should be cleaned up at the soonest possible time and in the most thorough manner possible by all relevant government agencies," the group said. Immediate assistance is being sought in the disaster area and yet SMC is showing its financial capability only where it has a profit interest.



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**Hey!**

Fishing banca lays idle at the shore of Pola, Oriental Mindoro amid the fishing ban imposed by the local government following the oil spill. It has been three weeks since the disaster happened in Tablas Strait.



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## Saving Mother Earth

**E**arth Hour has come and gone. But what about the other 8,759 hours of the year? We seem to be fixated on the ceremonial observances of environment-saving practices rather than being genuinely concerned about saving Mother Earth.

There are many aspects to environment protection: energy consumption, fossil-fuel pollution, and their impacts on climate change. Relying solely on governments to act on these is not going to solve the problems if we don't act responsibly in our individual lives to reduce our carbon footprints and water consumption.

We all use energy in our daily lives with lights, appliances, and vehicles 24 hours a day. We can choose to minimize usage, which is fine, but there comes a point when we can no longer reduce consumption. Turning off appliances works, as well as reducing the hours that we operate air-conditioners. We should rationalize our vehicular trips to reduce fuel consumption to the barest minimum.

At this point, we need to look at how we can generate energy on our own. Those who can afford to, should install solar panels or wind-energy generating devices on their rooftops. I did install solar panels on our roof, which reduced my energy bill by 60-70 percent depending on the time of year. Every time I'm in a discussion on energy matters, I never fail to talk about my example, which usually elicits great interest and, hopefully, action. It helps that solar-energy costs keep going down, so those who avail themselves of it now can realize a shorter recovery cost on their solar-energy investment. Return on investment usually runs to three to four years, which is not bad considering it lasts 20-25 years. The rest of the 20-25 years you operate your solar power system is gravy already.

A drawback cited is the expense of batteries to store electricity generated by the solar set-up. You don't need to purchase one. Meralco has a

net-metering system, which sends to the Meralco grid the energy generated in excess of what you consume. This is credited to your account and offsets electricity costs during non-generating hours of the night. That's how I've configured my solar power system.

Nowadays, the cost has gone down dramatically, thanks to China-made panels. So, while trade with China is still open (who knows what happens next in this politically volatile period), this is the most opportune time to put up your solar power system.

*Right now, we should try to lessen our use of plastics, but if it's unavoidable, ensure its reuse over and over, if possible. It's hard to avoid plastics because manufacturers have not lessened their use of plastic packaging.*

Solar systems may not be feasible for many who are not so well-off, but solar-powered individual lights and appliances are readily available and cheap now, again thanks to Chinese manufacturers. If everyone reduces their energy consumption from the grid, it will have an impact with the power of millions of consumers.

Electric vehicles (EV) are still beyond the reach of the average motorist, though prices are also going down with the tax incentives offered by virtue of the Electric Vehicle Act, which reduces tariffs on electric vehicles, gives 30 percent discount on battery electric vehicles and 15 percent discount for hybrid-electric vehicles, priority registration and

renewal and special plates by the LTO, exemption from the coding scheme, faster processing by the LTRFB for

public utility operators, incentives for financing institutions to offer lower interest rates, etc.

The offerings on the market so far are still prohibitive, even as I've been itching to buy one. Most fully electric EVs are high-end models, and as my car-savvy nephew said years ago, it wasn't the right time to buy one, since it wasn't cost-effective. As more distributors offer a larger variety of EVs, prices should go down further. Next year may just be the right time for me to go full electric. But I wish the public utility operators would embrace going electric now.

Then there's the impact of consumerism. The Philippines is said to be the third largest plastic polluter in the world, contributing 0.75 million metric tons of ocean plastic every year, thanks to the invention of the now-ubiquitous plastic sachets. The retail economy thrives on the sale of these single-use sachets, which are more affordable to the less-privileged Filipino. But it's time to ditch non-recyclable products and come up with alternatives. We have no shortage of innovative inventors who have come up with organic-based biodegradable packaging.

Right now, we should try to lessen our use of plastics, but if it's unavoidable, ensure its reuse over and over, if possible. It's hard to avoid plastics because manufacturers have not lessened their use of plastic packaging. My wife has taken to collecting plastic bottles for recycling, and I kid her that she spends more on gas to take the plasticware to the junk shop than she gets for it. But at least we're doing our part in not adding to the mountains of trash that litter the environment.

In the end, every little bit counts.



### UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

RAYMUND W. LO, MD, FPSP



## No to plastic drinking containers

**M**ore and more, we hear the calls all the time to reuse, to recycle, and they seem all the more urgent when it comes to plastics.

Those of us with young children are familiar with some of the school projects to recycle plastics, mainly to convert them into planters and handicrafts like Christmas lanterns.

People also sometimes reuse those plastic bottles for water and other beverages, looking at the bottom of the bottle for a number, with a common conception that the number indicates how many times you can reuse the bottle. The number is enclosed in a "chasing arrows code," referring

to the arrow symbols that make a triangle. But I was shocked to learn only recently, from a chemist friend, that the numbers tell you what kind of plastic is being used, not the number of times you can refill the bottle for drinking water.

I looked up several sources for explanations of the numbers and the best one was from [www.plasticfreebottles.com](http://www.plasticfreebottles.com). Here are the explanations:

The number "1" refers to PET or polyethylene terephthalate, the most common material for plastic bottles used for water and beverages. It turns out PET bottles were designed for single-use only and yet are the most commonly manufactured plastic for beverages so, generally speaking, you can't reuse the plastic bottles for anything you intend to drink. Please, that includes your pets.

The other numbers used for recycling code are for other types of plastics used for consumer products. Those with the numbers 3, 4, and 5 are classified as "appears to be safe."

The plastic medicine containers are usually polypropylene (number 5), which is considered safe. But if you do reuse for other medicines, as my fellow senior citizens love to do, make sure to wash out thoroughly and relabel.



### GRAY MATTERS

MICHAEL L. TAN

Now, on to particularly problematic plastics. The number 6 is used for polystyrene, a possible human carcinogen, and is sometimes used for plastic cutlery so watch out. A number 7 refers to other plastics including polycarbonates, which are used for baby bottles, water cooler bottles—and should be avoided because they contain bisphenol A, which can cause chromosomal damage. Many children's bottles now carry a label "bisphenol-free."

Most alarming is polyvinyl chloride or PVC, which has the number 3 and is nicknamed the poison plastic, found in many consumer products from blister packs that kids love to "pop" to garden hoses.

The recycling codes are there as guides for places where recycling is practiced, so they can be sorted out. PVC, for example, is produced in such large volumes that without recycling, we would be deluged by this toxic product.

In countries like the Philippines, very little recycling is being done so the codes are of limited use. The sometimes tacky planters and Christmas lanterns, with the soft drink brand still readable, can help raise environmental awareness. But in the long run, we need recycling facilities to process all kinds of plastics, in particular, the plastics used for the sachets for food, cosmetics, toothpaste, and other common consumer items. Even if they "appear to be safe," the huge amounts used for our *tingi* sachet economy end up clogging our waterways.

Note that the problem is not just the container—but those plastic rings used in packaging the bottles can reach our seas and cause choking and death in marine animals (including seabirds).

Back to land: For any kind of plastic used for food or beverages, do be aware that leaving the container in a hot place (for example, your car in the parking lot) can mean toxins leach out from the plastic into the beverage. If you or other friends have been drinking from the same bottle, you may have created an incubator for bacteria. (No reports yet of the fungi cordyceps, the focus of the sci-fi series "The Last of Us" on HBO.)

The long-term solution is to avoid using plastic bottles when you can. Instead, use glass, porcelain, or stainless steel containers. Make it a habit to bring these alternative containers—for both food and beverages, whenever you eat out, for take-out from the restaurant.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB DUNGO JR. FOR THE DAILY TRIBUNE [@tribuneph\\_hob](#)

A SIGN prohibiting people to swim at the Baseco Beach in Manila is displayed prominently along a sidewalk.





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### **Cadiz highlights Giant Clams Village**

CADIZ CITY – This city in northern Negros Occidental is showcasing its marine conservation efforts through the Giant Clams Village or G.C. Ville, a 1.3-hectare mollusks habitat adjacent to the famous Lakawon Island Resort in Barangay Cadiz Viejo.

Positioned as the city's next major ecotourism attraction, the G.C. Ville now has about 2,050 clams after more than two years of spawning.

Mayor Salvador Escalante Jr. said that following the observance of Earth Hour over the weekend, they will help raise awareness to preserve and protect the environment through the G.C. Ville.

PNA



## Regional Updates

### **Senator seeks inquiry on government's short-, long-term plans on water supply**

THE SENATE majority leader on Monday filed a resolution seeking to probe, in aid of legislation, the government's short- and long-term plans to address the water supply problem in Metro Manila and other parts of the country, especially with the onset of the dry season that is expected to be until end-May.

"Despite the abundance of water resources in the country, lack of sustainable water supply has been a constant problem, especially during the dry season," Senate Majority Leader Emmanuel Joel J. Villanueva said under Senate Resolution 561.

The archipelagic country is surrounded by 1,380 square kilometers of water area, with 421 principal river basins that serve as sources of daily sustenance and livelihood to communities.

Regulator Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System early this year warned of a possible water supply crisis in 2023 without new wa-

ter sources or additional water supply to meet increasing demand.

With the country's expanding population, water scarcity becomes a more serious concern, Mr. Villanueva said.

According to the Department of Health, Philippine population is expected to increase to 114 million by 2024.

Angat Dam, which has a storage capacity of about 850 million cubic meters, supplies 98% of Metro Manila's water needs, as well as irrigation needs of 25,000 hectares of farmlands in Bulacan and Pampanga.

"Although far from the critical water level of 180 meters, the decreasing trend of this year's water level is a cause of concern and an object of strict monitoring to avoid the situation in 2022 where water level was below critical level of 176 meters in the months of July and September," Mr. Villanueva said.

**Alyssa Nicole O. Tan**



# Maynilad sets daily water service interruptions

By DANESSA RIVERA

Customers of Maynilad Water Services Inc. will experience daily water service interruptions starting today as a measure to conserve water with the El Niño phenomenon projected in the second half of the year.

On its official Twitter account, Maynilad said it will implement daily water service interruptions in parts of its concession area starting March 28.

Maynilad said it has also placed mobile water tankers on standby to deliver potable water to customers.

Maynilad announced the complete list of affected areas and their corresponding service interruption schedules on its website, Facebook Page and Twitter account.

"These daily service interruptions will last depending on the actual raw water volume that our treatment plants will receive, as well as on actual rainfall that will occur at the watersheds," it said.

As the largest private water con-

cessionaire in the Philippines in terms of customer base, its concession area covers parts of Manila, Quezon City, Makati, Caloocan, Pasay, Parañaque, Las Piñas, Muntinlupa, Valenzuela, Navotas and Malabon; the cities of Cavite, Bacoor and Imus and the towns of Kawit, Noveleta and Rosario in Cavite.

Last week, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) issued an El Niño Watch, which is implemented when conditions are favorable for the development of the weather phenomenon within the next six months and probability is above 55 percent.

Maynilad said the elevation at Angat Dam is still manageable as of mid-March. However, as warned by PAGASA, the water firm does not expect sufficient rain over the watersheds in succeeding months to replenish the dams.

In light of the water service interruptions, Maynilad urged customers to keep enough water stored for use

during the hours when supply will not be available. The company also advised customers to expect some discoloration in the supply once water service resumes.

Meanwhile, Manila Water Co. Inc. said there are no scheduled water interruptions and round-the-clock supply in the east zone – which encompasses parts of Makati, Mandaluyong, Pasig, Pateros, San Juan, Taguig, Marikina, most parts of Quezon City, portions of Manila, as well as several towns in Rizal – will continue.

To keep its daily water supply, Manila Water said it is maximizing its Cardona Water Treatment Plant in Rizal that can deliver 110 million liters of water per day, operating the Marikina Portable Water Treatment Plant which can add 15-20 MLD and harnessing of groundwater through deep wells which can provide additional 100 MLD.

It has also implemented backwash recovery from its water treatment plants, which can add 20-30 MLD

and utilized the Alat Reservoir that can provide 10 MLD.

Manila Water has also commissioned the Calawis Treatment Plant, which can provide at least 20 MLD and the first phase of the East Bay project for another 50 MLD.

## Dam levels fall

The water level of Angat Dam and other dams have started to drop with the onset of the dry season, according to PAGASA.

Based on latest monitoring of PAGASA, as of 6 a.m. March 27, 2023, the level of Angat Dam slightly decreased to 203.62 meters compared to the 203.80 meters the day previous.

Angat Dam supplies more than 90 percent of Metro Manila's potable water needs and provides irrigation to 25,000 hectares of farmlands in Bulacan and Pampanga.

The weather bureau said that decline in water level was also observed at La Mesa Dam, with 76.52 meters compared to 76.54 meters on Sunday;

as well dams in Ambuklao (741.71 meters from 741.99 meters), Binga (573.86 meters from 573.92 meters), San Roque (242.72 meters from 243 meters) and Pantabangan (184.77 meters from 184.92 meters).

National Water and Resources Board executive director Sevilla David Jr. has urged the public to conserve water to prevent a repeat of what happened in 2019 when Angat's water level reached as low as 116 meters after El Niño hit the country.

David said that while the present water level in Angat Dam is higher compared to the 180 meters minimum operating level, necessary preparations should be done amid the possible impact of the dry spell.

PAGASA said El Niño will likely develop in July-August-September 2023 and may persist until 2024.

El Niño increases the likelihood of below-normal rainfall conditions, which could lead to dry spells and droughts in some areas of the Philippines. – With Bella Cariaso, Paolo Romero