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DENR

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE



Solve massive water service interruptions quickly, WRMO urged

By MARIO CASAYURAN

Sen. Grace Poe on Friday, April 28, said she expects the Water Resources Management Office (WRMO) to plunge into action to address the water service interruptions being experienced by households and businesses.

Poe issued the statement following the issuance of an executive order placing the WRMO under the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

"As it works out long-term solutions, the new body should address the need of the hour, which is water flowing from the tap," Poe said.

"Sa panahon ng tag-init, ang kawalan ng tubig na inumin, pam-paligo, o gamit sa opisina at malaking

sakripisyo (During summer, it is big sacrifice when there is lack of water to drink, to bathe, or for offices and businesses)," she said.

"Taun-taon naman ang tag-init, dapat nagkaroon na ng mahusay na plano at implementasyon para masigurong hindi mauubusan ng tubig ang bawat gripo (Every year during summer, there should be a workable plan and implementation to ensure that water from the taps do not go dry)," she added.

Poe said that with the WRMO being placed under the DENR, "we hope it will be given utmost importance to function effectively."

"We will continue to push for a law that would create a separate Department of Water to focus on effective water resources management to ensure that our people's need for water is sufficiently met," she added.



SENATOR GRACE POE (FB)



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Feat

By the latest report, about 500 Filipinos have been extracted from the civil war in Sudan. This is an impressive feat.

The extraction of Filipino nationals is spearheaded by the Philippine embassy in Cairo. DMW Secretary Toots Ople flew to Cairo days ago to personally supervise the rescue effort. Our brave diplomats in the Egyptian capital have moved closer to the border with Sudan to more effectively carry out the rescue mission. Two of them figured in a vehicular accident in their rush to get closer to the border.



The distances here are astounding. Evacuating Filipinos need to travel 1,000 kilometers overland to get to the Egyptian border. Cairo has been cooperative with the effort of several countries to extract their nationals from the chaos in Sudan.

We do not have journalists on the scene in the war-torn country. Because of this, we do not get detailed and updated reports about what is happening on the ground. Reports about our extraction efforts are sketchy at best.

We are assured, however, that our diplomats are doing their best, given the odds, to accomplish the extraction mission. This should reassure the millions of Filipino migrant workers that their government will not abandon them in the direst circumstances. They have a homeland that cares for them.

Despite scattered clashes across the country, it appears the ceasefire arranged between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) appears to be holding. This is the best window we have to rescue our nationals trapped in the conflict.

No one sees the conflict in Sudan subsiding anytime soon. The generals leading the rival militaries in Sudan are out to eliminate each other. In their struggle, they devastate whatever is left of Sudan's state. It will be a challenge to rebuild the nation from here.

Both armed factions involved in this struggle have blood on their hands. They were both engaged in the bloody suppression in the Darfur region. The RSF was precisely organized as part of the suppression campaign of the Arab Sudanese majority against the African Darfuri minority. It was formed out of the Janjaweed militia that terrorized Darfur.

The suppression campaign was conducted with unbridled cruelty, animated in part by ethnic cleansing and genocide. To this day, the terrified people of Darfur prefer to live in camps for fear of being attacked.

Ordinary Sudanese have nothing at stake in this power struggle between the generals. But they have lost all means to be heard in the country's politics after three decades of dictatorship and the past three years of military rule.

As the power struggle drags on without clear resolution, the Sudanese people are in peril of being forgotten by the rest of the world. After foreign nationals are evacuated, the ordinary Sudanese will be left stranded in a hell hole.

This will be the final tragedy of this conflict.

Precarious

We are teetering on the brink of serious shortages of two items basic to our subsistence: water and power.

The other day, a major power generating plant conked out. That depletes available power reserves. Brownouts appear likely.

We know from the past few years that our power plants, especially the aging ones, tend to conk out during the hottest months when power demand is highest. If another power plant conks out over the next few days, power rationing by way of rotating brownouts will be certain.

Meanwhile, we are told the water level in our major dams are dropping quickly. Last week's short-lived rains brought about by a stray tropical depression did nothing in replenishing our water stocks.

President Marcos ordered the creation of a Water Resources Management Office under the DENR. That office will be an important one, although it cannot produce the miracles we need to improve our water reserves. We did very little the past years in terms of building water impounding infra to support our water supply.

Meanwhile, the Kaliwa River project that will divert fresh water flowing out to the Pacific Ocean will need a few more years to complete. This project has been opposed by closed-minded environmentalists for years. The financial package needed to undertake this vital infra project was put together only recently.

The month of May will be particularly difficult. In this El Niño year, many parts of the country could experience drought. That will adversely affect our farm output and cause shortages.

We are expecting the inflation rate to slow down significantly. Shortages of agricultural goods, however, could force up the inflation rate once more. Rice, grown on submerged paddies, appears most vulnerable.

The severity of the droughts and the stability of our energy system will determine how much misery we will have to endure in the hottest and driest month of the year. The outage of a major generating plant and the rapid depletion of water in our dams are not encouraging signs.

The precariousness of both our energy and water supplies underscores the need to rapidly improve our infrastructure backbone. For too long, government dragged its feet in addressing our infrastructure deficiencies. It took too long to put together the financing required to modernize.

Now we have to move double time to improve both our energy and water infra. If we fail in that, our precariousness will be magnified. Life for all Filipinos will become even more miserable during the hot months.

We are already paying the price for many years of failure to invest in long-term strategic projects.

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FPI urges gov't to ban export of used car batteries

By CATHERINE TALAVERA

The Federation of Philippine Industries (FPI) is urging the government to enforce a ban on the export of used car batteries and lead scraps, saying this has economic and environmental impacts on the country.

In a statement, FPI chairman Jesus Arranza called on concerned government agencies to stop the illegal export of lead scraps usually obtained from used lead-acid batteries (ULAB) pursuant to local regulations and the country's commitment to the Basel Convention, an international treaty aimed at controlling the transboundary movements of hazardous wastes and their disposal.

"We don't (know) how these exporters are handling and dismantling their ULABs, which are hazardous wastes. What have they done to the plastic components and the acid, did they just throw them into the trash or bodies of water?" Arranza said.

He stressed that ULAB recyclers and their customers are being deprived of materials to make their operations more viable.

FPI said Republic Act 6969 or the Toxic Substances and Hazardous and Nuclear Wastes Control Act of 1990 and its implementing rules outlined in Department Administrative Order

(DAO) 2013-22 of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) prohibits the export of ULAB.

"As a matter of policy, export of hazardous wastes like lead scrap and ULAB is not allowed when the country of origin has the capability to recycle them. In the case of lead scrap and ULAB, we have Evergreen Environmental Resources Inc. (EERI), which operates state-of-the-art recycling facilities for ULABs in Bulacan," Arranza said.

FPI cited data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) which showed that around 8,500 tons of lead waste and scrap were exported by the Philippines from January to August last year.

Arranza said there is also no record if these exported lead scraps are in the form of ULABs or were merely separated from used auto batteries.

The FPI chairman said they found it alarming that the PSA has actual data on lead scrap exports, which indicates that such shipments actually went through official channels.

"If there is no clearance from the DENR, how did these shipments manage to slip through the Bureau of Customs (BOC) and even get reflected in the PSA export data? Also, how come there is no record from the DENR and Department of Trade Industry (DTI) of who these exporters are?" Arranza asked.



FPI, MOTOLITE SEAL BALIK BATERYA PROGRAM: The Federation of Philippine Industries and Motolite, the country's most trusted battery brand, have signed a memorandum of agreement for the Balik Baterya program that seeks to help ensure the proper collection and recycling of used lead acid batteries. The MOA was signed by FPI chairman Jesus Arranza (center) and Oriental & Motolite Marketing Corp. marketing head Alexander Osias (2nd from left), with (from left) Lloyd Arcedo, assistant vice president of Evergreen Environmental Resources Inc.; Max de Leon, corporate PR head of Motolite; and Rufino Margate Jr., FPI secretary general.



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BETWEEN THE DEVIL & THE OILY, POLLUTED SEA

BY REX ANTHONY NAVAL

FISHERMEN formerly making a living out of nature's generous aquatic bounty in the clear and pristine waters off Oriental Mindoro and other nearby provinces literally had the food from their mouths and their loved ones snatched away, no thanks to the oil spill caused by the sinking of M/T *Princess Empress* on February 28.

As of April 26, fisherfolk severely affected by this environmental disaster have now reached a total of 24,698, from figures provided by the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC).

This figure is broken down into 337 fishermen for Calabarzon; 24,266 for Mimaropa, and 95 for Region 6 as of this writing.

Loss of production was placed by the NDRRMC at P3,882,090,459.74 for all three regions combined.

Also, the NDRRMC reported that barangays affected by the oil spill numbered 205, which can be broken down into 30 for Calabarzon, 171 for Mimaropa, and four for Region 6.

Residents in these affected barangays amounted to 40,897 families or equivalent to 193,436 individuals.

Earlier, Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (DA-BFAR) maintained that the fishing ban in oil spill-affected communities has so far cost impacted fishermen P19 million daily.

These losses are expected to increase in the coming weeks and months as the fishing ban drags along.

Rubbing salt on wounds

IN a statement on April 26, the DA-BFAR recommended maintaining the fishing ban in all oil spill-hit barangays in Oriental Mindoro after recent oil and grease analysis showed significant increase in the amount of pollutants, possibly adding to the woes of suffering fisherfolk in the province.

"Results of oil and grease analysis in water samples collected

from affected areas in Oriental Mindoro on April 10 showed significant increases in amounts from previous analyses, albeit still within the standard for oil and grease of < 3.0 mg/L of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) based on water classification and use," it added.

The DA-BFAR also stressed that low-level polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) were likewise detected in all fish samples from Oriental Mindoro collected on April 3.

"PAH accumulation was observed in samples collected from the municipalities of Bongabong and San Teodoro; however, there is currently no sufficient data showing an increasing trend. Further tests will be taken to gather needed time-series data and confirm if accumulation is taking place in marine organisms collected from the province," it added.

In light of these developments, the DA-BFAR recommends keeping fishing bans in oil spill-hit municipalities in Oriental Mindoro since the analyses are not yet conclusive evidence as far as food safety is concerned.

Alternative fishing grounds

REALIZING the dire effects of this decision, the DA-BFAR also recommended alternative fishing grounds for local fishermen to be impacted by the fishing ban.

This will be done in coordination with the Department of the Interior and Local Government, so that these fishermen will have a means of livelihood.

"These are the municipal waters of Paluan, Abra de Ilog, San Jose and Magsaysay in Occidental Mindoro; Boac and Gasan in



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OIL slick removal in Oriental Mindoro. PHILIPPINE COAST GUARD

Marinduque; and Concepcion in Romblon. Subsequently, the DA-BFAR will provide them with fuel subsidies as additional assistance," it added.

Small blessings

MEANWHILE, DA-BFAR said water samples collected from Caluya, Antique, on March 28 passed the DENR standard for oil and grease of < 3.0 mg/L.

"Fish samples collected from the province on April 11 showed no signs of oil tainting through organoleptic analyses. On the other hand, signs of oil tainting were observed on shellfish samples. Seaweed samples previously subjected to laboratory analysis also contained traces of PAHs. Further laboratory testing is currently being conducted, results of which will be shared once available. No new sightings of the oil spill have been reported since March 4," it added.

Following the results of the analyses, the DA-BFAR, through its regional office in Western Visayas, formulated activity- and site-specific recommendations, that is, allowing fishing activities outside the reef zone of affected areas of Sitio Sabang, Barangay Tinogboc, Sitio Sigayan, Sitio Toong, Barangay Semirara, Sitio Liwagao, Barangay Sibolo and adjacent deeper waters.

"However, the bureau also recommends prohibiting shellfish gathering and seaweed harvesting in affected areas since these organisms may have greater exposure to oil-spill contaminants," it pointed out.

And as of April 12, the municipal government of Caluya, Antique, has allowed regulated fishing activities within the vicinity of Semirara Island, Nagubat Island, and Liwagao Island, such that:

- No fishing and collecting of shells shall be done in the shoreline and shallow areas of Sitio Sabang, Sitio Toong, Sitio Sigayan and Sitio Liwagao;
- Fish catch shall be reported to the barangay using the form on the record of fish catch issued by the Office of the Municipal Agriculturist;
- The barangay shall closely monitor the fishing activities of its residents in coordination and collaboration of their respective associations;
- In the event when contamination exists on fish catch, fishing activities shall be temporarily canceled until such time that the areas identified are declared safe for fishing.

DA-BFAR interventions

THE agency assured fishing communities in the affected areas that it remains committed to providing science-based recommendations for concerned government agencies and local government units through continuous sample collection and analyses of seafood from affected areas.

"The bureau is also fast-tracking the laboratory analyses without compromising the accuracy of data. Findings and recommendations will be shared to the public and concerned government offices as soon as data be-


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comes available," it stressed.

DA-BFAR also pointed out that it will continue to support affected fishing communities.

"In total, the bureau has so far spent P22 million for livelihood and relief assistance. Of these, P4.4 million was allocated for livelihood assistance for 10 fisherfolk associations and cooperatives or 689 families; over P1.5 million was utilized for food assistance to more than 5,000 affected fisherfolk in Mimaropa; and P580,500 was spent for food assistance to displaced fishing groups in Western Visayas," it noted.

Also, funds have also been allocated for the grant of fiberglass-reinforced plastic (FRP) boats with marine engines to affected fisherfolk in Oriental Mindoro.

In addition, the DA-BFAR has deployed monitoring, control and surveillance vessels, as well as PPE sets and other materials for clean-up activities.

"Additional funding will be used for supplementary interventions as the DA-BFAR eyes to provide more FRP boats, fish aggregating devices, aquaculture feed mill projects, bangus fry, tilapia fingerlings, fish cages, and PPE sets for clean-up activities to areas affected by the oil spill," it emphasized.

ROV operations

AS this developed, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) announced on April 17 the completion of under-

water remotely operated vehicle (ROV) operations in Oriental Mindoro province as part of mitigation efforts in the oil spill.

It added that the ROV identified 24 sources of leakage from the sunken vessel and temporarily capped all but one using specialized bags from the United Kingdom and a local source.

The Unified Incident Command Post in Calapan City sourced 16 specialized bags from a golf bag manufacturing company in Silang, Cavite.

"One remaining pressure valve producing a slow intermittent release of oil at the 2nd Pressure Valve portside was not capped due to obstructions that may compromise the ROV operations," the PCG reported.

It also expressed appreciation for the presence of dynamic positioning vessels *Shin Nichi Maru* of Japan and the United States' *Pacific Valkyrie*, the Japan Coast Guard, US Navy Supervisor of Salvage, local government units, and other stakeholders for their support during the ROV operations.

The PCG said it will continue to cooperate with agencies in offshore and shoreline cleanup and assessment to reduce the environmental impact until the source of the spill is permanently addressed.

The oil tanker carrying 800,000 liters of industrial fuel oil sank off Naujan town on February 28.



'Oil spill cleanup 80% complete'

THE oil spill cleanup along the shorelines of the affected areas in Oriental Mindoro is nearing completion, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) reported on Thursday.

The incident management team of PCG in Oriental Mindoro said that the shoreline cleanup completeness in Pola, Oriental Mindoro is at 80.71 percent and 74.82 percent in the shoreline of Naujan.

"This was based on the day 59 summary report after the resurvey at the following *barangay* (villages) in Pola: Misong, Tagumpay, Puting Caco, Tiguihan, Bayanan, Zone 1, Zone 2, Batuhan, Calima, Buhay na Tubig, and Bacawan; including Barangay Masaguing and Barangay Herrera in Naujan," the report said.

Based on the update by the PCG, the oil spill response team was able to clean 28 out of 34 kilometers of affected shoreline in Pola and five out of seven kilometers in Naujan.

Three villages in Pola were declared 100 percent clean, these are

Barangay Tiguihan, Barangay Zone 1 and Barangay Zone 2.

"Concerned government agencies and stakeholders now conduct Phase 2 and 3 of shoreline cleanup by flushing, pressure washing on hard surfaces, pebble washing, and manual cleaning," the PCG said.

Moreover, the PCG continuously monitors the vicinity waters for possible new oil slick sightings.

Meanwhile, the Embassy of the Republic of Korea turned over oil spill equipment to Philippine Coast Guard Officer in Charge Rolando Punzalan Jr. that will be used to contain the oil leak.

Eight trucks or equivalent to 20 tons of oil absorbent mat were turned over by Counselor Kwon Soon Hyun and Secretary Kim Dosik of the Korean embassy to the PCG on Thursday.

The PCG received 1,800 boxes of pads sorbents, 200 boxes of snare sorbents, 134 boxes of personal protective equipment, and 50 packs of solid flotation curtain booms from Korea.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



Writ of kalikasan and science: Is the risk from GMOs or from judicial activism?

THE Supreme Court recently



ON THE CONTRARY

ANTONIO CONTRERAS

issued a writ of kalikasan in the form of a temporary environmental protection order (TEPO) against the commercial production and sales of Golden Rice and Bt eggplant, both of which are considered to be genetically modified organisms (GMOs). GMOs are plants whose genetic makeup is altered by inserting non-plant genes.

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Golden Rice, for example, is produced by inserting genes from corn and from soil bacteria, while the eggplant in question uses genes from *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt), hence its name Bt eggplant.

The intention of breeding GMO crops is actually noble. Golden Rice is capable of synthesizing beta-carotene, and would help solve the widespread problem of vitamin A deficiency. Bt eggplant has the ability to produce its own toxin to kill pests such as the shoot and fruit borer. Thus, on their own, these GMOs appear to have positive impacts. Golden Rice has a positive impact on human health, as it would provide an accessible and convenient source of vitamin A, particularly to Filipinos who eat it as their staple food. Bt eggplant will help minimize the dependency on chemical pesticides and would have positive impacts on human and environmental health, including reducing the cost of production which would, in turn, help farmers.

However, there are fears that because these plants have tinkered with nature, in that they are transgenic, there could be a risk of side effects not only on human health, but also to the health of the environment. This is the basis on which a group of activists and cause-oriented groups led by Magsasaka at Siyentipiko Para sa Pag-Unlad ng Agrikultura, Greenpeace and Searice petitioned the Supreme Court in October of last year to stop the commercialization of these GMO crops.

The court issued GR 263565 which enjoined the Department of Agriculture (DA), Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Department of Health, director of the Bureau of Plant Industry of the DA, the Philippine Rice Research Institute and the University of the Philippines-Los Baños, who are the named respondents, to file a verified return.

The writ of kalikasan is "a remedy available to a natural or juridical person, entity authorized by law, people's organization, nongovernment organization or any public interest group accredited by or registered with any government agency, on behalf of persons whose constitutional right to a balanced and healthful ecology is violated, or threatened with violation by an unlawful act or omission of a public official or employee, or private individual or entity, involving environmental damage of such magnitude as to prejudice the life, health or property of inhabitants in two or more cities or provinces."

Since the order issued was a TEPO; what is being restrained is the commercialization of Golden Rice and Bt eggplant pending the final decision of the court. That is, it is not yet decided whether commercialization will be forever barred. That decision will only come after the respondents will be heard by the court. The decision to grant the petition is akin to a temporary restraining order. Since a TEPO is issued, the respondents will now have the chance to submit their verified answers to the petition.

The main intent of the petitioners is to permanently bar the commercial propagation of Golden Rice and Bt eggplant until a proof of safety and compliance with legal requirements is presented. Petitioners also demand for the cancellation of all biosafety permits issued for the two crops. In addition, they also want that risks and impacts be assessed by these government agencies, and that informed consent is obtained from farmers and Indigenous peoples. Finally, petitioners also want that liability mechanisms for damages should be implemented. Whether the court will grant these demands, and issue a more permanent environment protection order to prohibit certain actions by the respondents, or direct the government agencies to perform certain actions, will depend on the arguments that will be raised during the hearing phase of the proceedings.

The issuance of a writ of kalikasan, and the eventual issuance of a decision by the high court granting or denying the privilege of the writ, while a legal matter, would also necessarily require scientific considerations. Like issues that are political in nature, where courts tend to refrain from making judicial determination, it may also happen that on issues that are pregnant with technical and scientific considerations, the courts may likewise refrain from judicially overriding science.

This is particularly crucial in the issue of Golden Rice and Bt eggplant, where there may be no actual empirical evidence to support adverse claims. One of the measures that the court can take, as contained in its rules, is to resort to discovery measures, such as conducting actual ocular inspections. Since much of the risks being raised against Golden Rice and Bt eggplant would happen when there is commercialization, which has not happened yet, then the prospect of generating useful and relevant evidence by discovery may be futile. The Manila Bay case was easier since there was already observable and actual pollution of the bay.

This is the problem with this case since it has the risk of relying on projections of impacts, the evidence for which may not necessarily be available, and hence cannot be a robust basis for defending or assailing science. And it would be risky to prohibit actions based solely on fear of the unknown phantom, or the imagined effects based on biased fears and on anecdotal evidence. It would be easier to file a writ against government agencies to order them to ban the use of single-use plastics or smoke-belching jeepneys. Deciding on the risks of GMOs that have yet to be commercialized may set a dangerous precedent of inviting all types of challenges to every new technology in the market.

While we cannot dismiss the risk associated with GMOs, we also cannot take lightly the risk of the judiciary intruding much on science, that it could end up litigating what would otherwise be a scientific question.