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DENR ready to reveal illegally occupied areas in West PH Sea

By ELLSON QUISMORIO

Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Secretary Maria Antonia Yulo-Loyzaga has committed to inform congressmen about the actual magnitude of China's incursions in the West Philippine Sea (WPS).

Receiving this commitment Wednesday, Aug. 16, was Albay 1st District Rep. Edcel Lagman and the House Committee on Appropriations.

During the appropriation panel's deliberation on DENR's proposed budget for 2024, Lagman, an independent minority congressman, sought data on the magnitude of Philippine sovereign territorial properties in the West Philippine Sea illegally occupied and developed by China.

Lagman learned from the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority (NAMRIA), which is under the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), that it had the data.

But when the Bicolano asked if DENR could disclose the data, Loyzaga replied, "If I may recommend that we have an executive session regarding this topic in order to actually address the question."

An executive session is basically a closed-door meeting. However, the budget hearings are open to the public.

"If you have the data, why do we need to have an executive session? Kindly disclose the data now, because we are claiming that China has occupied so much of the territory awarded to the Philippines," Lagman said. "As advised by our representative on the Task Force West Philippine Sea, we do need clearance from the National Security Council in order for us to release this data."

She would later qualify this data as the "actual identification of the illegally occupied areas" in the WPS.

When Lagman asked Loyzaga to request for such clearance, the latter obliged and said, "We will request the clearance."

She said she would furnish the appropriations panel with both their request to the council and the data on the Chinese incursions.

Lagman had earlier sought the same information Tuesday, Aug. 15, from Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Secretary Enrique Manalo during the DFA's budget hearing. However, Manalo said they didn't have it and instead pointed the veteran solon to NAMRIA.



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DENR: Reclamations not in sync with Manila Bay rehab

By ELLSON QUISMORIO

The suspended reclamation projects in Manila Bay aren't in line with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources' (DENR) rehabilitation program for the bay.

DENR Secretary Maria Antonia Yulo-Loyzaga said this when she appeared before the House Committee on Appropriations, which tackled the agency's proposed budget for 2024 on Wednesday, Aug. 16.

During the appropriations panel briefing, OFW Party-list Rep. Marissa Magsino asked Yulo-Loyzaga about the activities of the Philippine Reclamation Authority (PRA) in Manila Bay and how it affects its supposed rehabilitation.

"Yun pong ating project is to have clean water pero ang ginagawa po ng PRA ay sila po ay nagtatambak for the reclamation. So, parang contradicting po, nahihilo po tayo ano po ba dapat ang gawin (Our project is to have clean water, but the PRA has been piling up dirt for the reclamation. So, it appears contradicting and its confusing, what should be done about it)?" Magsino said. **►6**

DENR: Reclamations not in sync with Manila Bay rehab ◀

"In our view, there is a contradiction between the reclamation and the rehabilitation of the [Manila] bay if a cumulative impact assessment is not conducted to mitigate the possible impacts of the changes in the environment that the reclamation may actually cause," Loyzaga told the solon.

President Marcos had ordered a pause to the reclamation projects following the airing of public concern over the activities at the historic bay.

"The intention of the

suspension for review is to actually conduct what is called the cumulative impact assessment, which means that instead of evaluating each and every project proposal individually, there will now be an effort to create a situation or a scenario where in all these reclamation projects will actually occur and what impact that would be in the baseline condition of Manila Bay as we know it today," said Loyzaga.

There are 22 suspended reclamation projects in Manila Bay.



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EDITORIAL

Save Manila Bay from reclamations

President Marcos' decision to suspend almost all reclamation projects at Manila Bay may be long overdue, but it's a commendable move hailed and welcomed by environmental groups that described it as "a resounding victory for coastal ecosystems and the Filipino people."

"All reclamation projects are under review. There is only one that will continue because it was already reviewed," the President said early last week, during a situation briefing on the massive flooding in Bulacan caused by heavy rains from Typhoon "Egay." "There are a lot of problems. We saw many projects that are not being managed, operated properly," Mr. Marcos added.

The indefinite suspension comes on the heels of the United States Embassy's statement expressing concern over the environmental impact of the reclamation projects, and their ties to China Communications Construction Co. (CCCC), which the embassy said has been cited by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank "for engaging in fraudulent business practices." The embassy also noted that CCCC was involved in "helping the Chinese military construct and militarize artificial islands in the South China Sea."

It was not clear which project was exempted since the President did not specify it, but Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Secretary Ma. Antonia Yulo-Loyzaga took pains to clarify that all 22 Manila Bay reclamation projects were suspended.

In announcing their suspension, the President himself noted the ill effects of the projects: "[I]f they all push through, many rivers will be clogged, including the ones emptying into [Manila Bay]. The water will have nowhere to go. Even on Roxas Boulevard, the sea will disappear," he said.

The reclamation projects in Manila Bay are at various stages of development, according to data from the Philippine Reclamation Authority, which former president Rodrigo Duterte had transferred from the DENR to the Office of the President in 2019 through Executive Order No. 74.

Environmental groups have long deplored these projects, citing their destruction of Manila Bay's ecosystem and the displacement of coastal communities. They've repeatedly cited the bay's crucial role as the center of biodiversity with over eight species of shellfish and 50 species of fish in its waters, while serving as a stopover for migratory birds. With the bay's coastline stretching across eight provinces in Luzon and three regions, it becomes the natural outlet of several waterways. Blocking it with reclaimed structures can only lead to devastating floods and the resulting loss of crops, several groups have pointed out.

"Creating land where there was once only water brings irreversible destruction to marine habitats and makes us vulnerable to disasters," the group Oceana said, adding that the dumping and filling of the seas is illegal and violates the people's constitutional right to a balanced and healthful ecology, while depriving fisherfolk in surrounding communities of their livelihood that would consequently endanger food security.

Previous studies have also cited Manila Bay's increased vulnerability to environmental hazards because of climate change that is expected to bring increased rainfall, stronger storm surges in coastal areas, and rising sea levels that would result in the rapid sinking of land or subsidence.

The National Mapping and Resource Information Authority on Tuesday noted that sea levels in Manila are rising at thrice the global average: 8.4 millimeters a year compared to 3.4 mm/year global average based on data from 1902 to 2022. A more recent analysis from 1965 shows an even higher average of more than 14.4 mm sea level rise every year.

On top of such ecological risks, US Ambassador MaryKay Carlson last week raised concerns on the damage that reclamation projects could wreak on the cultural and heritage appeal of Roxas Boulevard which lines the bay famous for a glorious view of the sunset. Recall that Manila Bay has witnessed historic battles such as the Battles of La Naval de Manila that ended Dutch attempts to seize the Philippines, the Battle of Manila Bay during the Philippine-American War, and battles during World War II that saw the bay's fortified islands, like Corregidor, suffer heavy damage.

So what happens next? How long will this "indefinite suspension" last?

Why not a clear, inclusive, and extensive national policy on reclamation then, that would prevent local government officials from making shady and secret lucrative deals with housing and real estate consortiums?

Transparency is crucial as well for government efforts to be taken seriously. For a start, why not divulge the name of that project exempted from the suspension, including its proponents, so that stakeholders can validate the reported review process that merited its exemption?

Otherwise, Yulo-Loyzaga's vow that the DENR is here "to actually implement environmental laws," would be mere rhetoric.



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River dredger

Over the last three years, San Miguel Corporation has spent P3 billion to dredge rivers to prevent flooding. It is not San Miguel's job to do this, but Ramon S. Ang figures that if the rivers do not get dredged quickly enough, San Miguel's businesses are adversely affected by flooding.

San Miguel started to acquire equipment for dredging in response to the perennial problem of flooding at its Polo, Valenzuela brewery plant. The problem was with the Tullahan River, which was heavily silted and full of garbage, compromising Tullahan's carrying capacity for flood waters.

DEMAND AND SUPPLY



BOO CHANCO

They can't afford the annual flooding of their brewery. So, RSA decided to spend a billion pesos to dredge Tullahan. Dredging is simply the removal of sediments or debris from waterways to increase their flood carrying capacity and flow.

The Tullahan River cleanup project, which started in 2020, was completed in 2022. SMC's cleanup teams extracted 1.12 million tons of wastes for the more than two-year run of the project. The project was able to deepen and widen the river to increase its water holding capacity to reduce severe flooding.

Next came the cleanup of the San Juan River, which San Miguel undertook when it was building the Stage 3 of the expressway project connecting SLEX to NLEX. Due to right of way problems, they had to use part of the river, but they needed to clean it up and to regularly clean it up thereafter. Due to the cleanup, areas that flooded easily along Araneta Avenue in Quezon City didn't flood anymore.

Then, there is the P2 billion Pasig River cleanup, a challenge taken up so many times before with little success until now. SMC is expecting to extract some three million metric tons of solid waste in the Pasig River to allow it to channel flood waters more efficiently. Also undertaken was SMC's coastal cleanup efforts in Tanza, Navotas City.

The P3 billion so far spent by San Miguel on river dredging seems to be producing more visible results more quickly than the hundreds of billions being spent by DPWH on their annual flood prevention projects.

According to the Budget department, they have allotted more than P255 billion for flood prevention projects for 2024. That brings up a total of P1.052 trillion in pork-laden flood control projects in eight years.

If you are looking for pork barrel funds inserted in the national budget, flood control projects are a favorite of politicians. Not long ago, some P385 million went to a Bicol town that state engineers said never floods. During the height of the pandemic, flood control projects got more money than DOH.

Sen. Grace Poe asked: "Why is the funding for the flood control projects of DPWH bigger than the entire budget of DOH? I just want to clarify that the fund of DOH is P131.22 billion, but the fund of DPWH for flood control projects is at least P150 billion." In 2022, P283 billion was allocated for

flood control infrastructures.

Corruption is why we still have devastating floods, specially in Central Luzon, despite large budgets. But it is easy and not too costly to do an honest job of flood control.

During the height of the flood in Pampanga two weeks ago, RSA boarded a helicopter to see for himself what was causing it. According to him, he noticed that water was being held up before the Tulaoc bridge, but water was flowing smoothly after the bridge. There is obviously some obstruction in the river, he said.

RSA surmised that the DPWH contractor created an artificial island in the river for their heavy equipment during construction or dredging. But they forgot to clean up when they were done. The solution, he said, is simply to dredge that part of the river to remove the obstruction. He offered to do it for free even if it is not his responsibility.

No, RSA said, there is no need to raise the bridge or raise the NLEX. Simple dredging will solve the problem.

RSA wanted to prove his airport project in Bulacan has nothing to do with the recent flooding. It is to his company's interest to make sure those floods do not happen, specially in the vicinity of the airport. That is why part of the airport project is a flood management plan. SMC commenced cleanup initiatives for Meycauyan river in October 2022, followed by Maycapiz/Talipot river last March.

So far, SMC has removed 540,000 metric tons of silt and waste, or 40 percent of the target volume, covering 4.4 kms of the 13 kms initial length around the airport site perimeter. SMC expects to complete the cleanup and dredging of the surrounding rivers of the new airport site by Feb next year.

In a meeting with the governors of Bulacan and Pampanga I attended, RSA committed to invest time and resources to clean up waterways outside of the airport perimeter and further upstream of Meycauyan and Talipot rivers and its main tributaries. This will finally address the long-standing problem of flooding in Meycauyan, Marilao, Bocaue and Guiguinto.

San Miguel will also include in its river cleanup project other waterways outside of the airport site's river network. This includes rivers in the northern part of Bulacan, where tributaries from northern towns of Bulacan, such as Calumpit, Malolos, Hagonoy, and Paombong discharge waters. These are also linked to the rivers in Pampanga and Nueva Ecija, and are more at risk whenever waters in dams are released due to prolonged heavy rains.

Dredging rivers and the shorelines of our seas will help give some relief from flooding problems, but we need longer term solutions. We know that the floods we experience are exacerbated by human failures. With climate change causing heavier rainfall than usual, we need to shape up.

We need to fix our inadequate drainage systems, deforestation, urbanization, and improper land use planning. To prevent future floods, a comprehensive approach is required. And we need early warning systems to provide timely alerts to communities at risk.

Mr. Ang has shown us dealing with flooding doesn't cost as much as the pork-laden DPWH budgets suggest.

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REGIONS

SC order a victory for Palawan env't

PUERTO PRINCESA CITY—Environmental groups hailed the writ of kalikasan issued by the Supreme Court against government agencies and two companies involved in mining operations on Mt. Mantalingahan. They also praised the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples for "being true to its mandate" after it served an order stopping nickel extraction in Brooke's Point town.

—STORY BY GERALDFORD TICKE

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FRUIT OF VIGILANCE The series of protests staged by residents of Brooke's Point in Palawan province against mining operations in their midst has bore fruit after the Supreme Court issued a writ of kalikasan that will protect Mt. Mantalingahan and local communities. Photo shows Brooke's Point residents joining one of the protest rallies held in the town from February to March. —CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

SC order hailed as victory for Palawan env't, IPs

Antimining group says kalikasan writ 'interesting precedent'; NCIP serves CDO vs mine firm

By Geraldford Ticke @InquirerLuzon

PUERTO PRINCESA CITY—An antimining group hailed the writ of kalikasan (nature) issued by the Supreme Court against government agencies and two private firms involved in mining operations on Mt. Mantalingahan as an "interesting precedent" for the province of Palawan.

Lawyer Grizelda Mayo-Anda, executive director of the Palawan-based Environmental Legal Assistance Center, said the SC issuance was an "extra special development" for those fighting for the conservation of the environment in the province.

"It is a good precedent considering that Palawan being only one province can be covered by a writ of kalikasan, it only illustrates the important and significant value of Palawan forests and biodiversity, that it benefits not only Palawan but the whole country and probably even the whole world," Mayo-Anda stated in a phone interview on Wednesday.

She added: "We are hoping that with this precedent, other groups can also have their share."

The high court issued the writ of kalikasan against the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Mines and Geosciences Bureau, Ipilil Nickel Corp. (INC) and Celestial Nickel Mining and Exploration Corp. (Celestial Mining) on Tuesday.

A writ of kalikasan is a legal remedy for the protection of one's right to "a balanced and healthful ecology in accord with the rhythm and harmony of nature" under Article II, Section 16 of the 1987 Constitution.

Important biodiversity

According to Mayo-Anda, a writ of kalikasan is also a special remedy in the rules of procedures on environmental cases, ordering a company to answer within 10 days of receiving an environmental complaint.

"But what's good here is that the Mt. Mantalingahan Protected Landscape was given importance because what is coming out is that the biodiversity of Mantalingahan covers or affects more than two cities or two provinces, which is a requirement for the issuance of a writ of kalikasan," she told the Inquirer.

"Because Mantalingahan has an important biodiversity

that benefits not only Palawan but the whole country, that was given weight in the issuance of the writ," she said.

The case stemmed from the petition filed by the indigenous Cultural Communities of Bicamm Ancestral Domain in Brooke's Point town.

The high court said it found the mining operations by INC and Celestial Mining "may cause irreparable environmental damage" to the Mt. Mantalingahan protected area and the ancestral domain of Palawan communities.

Other groups are happy over the issuance of a cease and desist order (CDO) by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP)-Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, Palawan) regional office and the subsequent issuance of a writ of kalikasan by the SC.

Jaybee Garganera, Alyansa Tigil Mina national coordinator, praised the NCIP-Mimaropa for "being true to its mandate of protecting indigenous peoples (IPs)."

But Mayo-Anda said the immediate implementation of the CDO was critical to address the IPs' displacement and the deforestation of their ancestral domain

covered by mining operations.

"Since 2017, thousands of trees have been cut inside their sacred grounds and watersheds. The continuing threat to the IPs' livelihood, culture and food security needs to be addressed," she said.

The CDO was officially served to INC on Wednesday morning, said lawyer Jansen Jontilla, NCIP provincial director.

Mayo-Anda said the CDO's effect was more immediate compared to the writ because it was clear in the order that the mining firm should halt operation.

"By Aug. 21, they should stop their operation; otherwise, they can be cited for contempt..." Mayo-Anda said.

Prior to the CDO, the NCIP-Mimaropa also suspended the free, prior and informed consent of the company on June 20.

INC is, however, challenging the CDO and is asking the NCIP to revoke it, claiming that the company is exempted from securing a certificate of precondition.

According to INC, Celestial Mining obtained a Mineral Production Sharing Agreement back in 1993, years before the Indigenous People's Rights Act of 1997 was implemented. 18Q



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Odette's devastation of Palawan's forests

Puerto Princesa—Perhaps because it happened in the middle of the pandemic, and it didn't claim as many lives as Supertyphoon "Yolanda," Typhoon "Odette"—which struck Northern Mindanao, Visayas, and Mimaropa in December 2021—does not register as strongly in our national discourse, notwithstanding its being the second-costliest typhoon in the country's history and, with 280 kilometers per hour sustained winds, only the third category 5-equivalent supertyphoon ever to be recorded in the West Philippine Sea.

But Palawēños have vivid memories of that day, a week before Christmas, when a typhoon came with such force that nobody on the island had expected or experienced. And Palawan's forests carry the imprint and the yet unhealed scars of a devastating supertyphoon: One whose after effects linger, further threatening the already imperiled ecosystems of one of the most beautiful and biodiverse islands in the world.

Having lived in Puerto Princesa a decade ago and having followed its environmental issues since then (including in my capacity as a scientific advisor to the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development), the landscapes of this province are most familiar to me, especially since, as an avid hiker, I've also hiked most of its major peaks, from Mount Capoas and Cleopatra's Needle in the north to Victoria and Mantalingajan in the south. For my Puerto Princesa-based hiking buddies and friends, what was most ominous was the turning of "entire mountains from green to brown" in the wake of Odette's devastation: a common expression to describe the impact.

Beyond such observations and narratives, a report by the United States Agency for International Development's Philippine Sustainable Interventions for Biodiversity, Oceans, and Landscapes (USAID SIBOL) project, presented to stakeholders last year, elucidates just how devastating Odette was, particularly for the forests north of Puerto Princesa. Guided by a "green assessment



SECOND OPINION

GIDEON LASCO

framework," the data they used were based initially on satellite imaging and modeling, followed by drone surveillance, rapid biodiversity field assessments, and focus group discussions.

Perhaps the most alarming statistic is the scale and magnitude of the damage. In the language of the assessment (see <https://tinyurl.com/5fxp52bt> for the full report), "About 57 percent (125,581 hectares) was transformed to open forest or nonforest," with widespread defoliation of forest cover, and high numbers of fallen or uprooted trees. In Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park (PPSRNP)—a World Heritage Site and arguably the crown jewel of the island, "More than half (58 percent) or 9,619 ha of the forests were damaged" and in Cleopatra's Needle Critical Habitat, "Fifty percent (50 percent) or 15,728 ha of forests were reduced into open forests or nonforest overnight."

Consequently, owing to loss of their tree habitats, the diversion of rivers and streams, among other changes, the toll on biodiversity has likewise been tremendous. Once a regular presence in the mountains, the Palawan hornbill (*Anthracoceros marchei*) with its distinctive white beak has become a rarity, and the report warns that "[t]he species' long-term survival is greatly compromised." The same can be said

of the Palawan peacock-pheasant (*Polyplectron napoleonis*) and even the mighty Almaciga (*Agathis philippinensis*), which holds profound economic importance not just for the island's ecosystems but for its indigenous peoples.

"When we speak of typhoons, we think of the number of casualties; the economic cost of the damage," Elizabeth Maclang, PPSRNP's park superintendent, told me. "But other species are affected, too, and that's incalculable loss to our ecosystems." Her teary-eyed recollection of Odette includes the plight of birds, like a dying "kalav" (hornbill) found along the tree-obstructed roads, just as overwhelmed by the typhoon as humans.

Such devastation has compounded the fact that even before Odette, environmentalists and scientists were already sounding the alarm on Palawan's environmental crises, which on top of the climate crisis have been brought about by mining and quarrying; illegal logging and illegal wildlife trade; the conversion of forests to monocrop plantations; unsustainable infrastructure projects; among others. Just months before the typhoon, a report from the Global Forest Watch revealed that from 2002 to 2020, Palawan lost 163,000 ha of tree cover: seven times larger than the entire PPSRNP.

Humans, indeed, have proved to be more destructive than typhoons, but might Odette wake us up into urgent action? How can we realize a Palawan that is greener than ever, as the island and our country face the threat of ever-more-intense typhoons? And how can we cultivate an ecological consciousness that will make people care more about our forests, mangroves, and reefs in the first place?

In my next column, I will reflect further on these questions, drawing on the recommendations of scientists behind the USAID SIBOL report, as well as the insights I am learning from this trip.

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PHL and Germany vow deeper ties to fight climate change

By SAMUEL P. MEDENILLA
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PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. on Thursday said he considers Germany as a key ally in pushing for his climate-change agenda globally.

During the presentation of credentials of new German Ambassador Andreas Michael Pfaffernoschke in Malacañang, the Chief Executive said the country's newly signed partnership with Germany will help in his promotion of "the climate agenda in both the local and international settings."

"It is axiomatic to me to say that no country can do this alone. The economies, climate change, energy, all of these things have to be done in partnership. So, let's look in that direction Mr. Ambassador," Marcos said during the event.

Under the Philippines-Germany Joint Declaration of Intent on Interdepartmental Consultations for Bilateral Technical Cooperation Projects, both countries will "hold regular interdepartmental consultations about ongoing and pipeline bilateral technical cooperation projects" related to climate, energy and biodiversity.

The Marcos administration, through the Climate Change Commission, has been calling for the creation of loss and damage mechanism to help in the climate change adaptation measures of developing countries.

The President stressed the importance of a collective response from the international community to address the effects of climate change.

"I always describe it as really the first truly global problem that humanity faces because it's global in the sense that everybody is affected. And it's also global because we cannot solve it without everybody doing their part," Marcos said.

Aside from climate change the President and Pfaffernoschke discussed the thriving people-to-people connections between the Philippines and Germany.

They committed to maintain the Philippine-Germany diplomatic relations, which will mark its 70th anniversary next year, and exploring other areas of cooperation.

"There are many things that I think we can do. I hope few of them will come to fruition so that we can say that we have done the fullest that we can do in this partnership," Marcos said.



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Addressing today's most urgent needs and preparing for the future



Sonny M. Angara

BETTER DAYS

THE Senate has officially started its deliberations on the proposed P5.768 trillion national budget for 2024 with the briefing of the Development Budget Coordination Committee on the macroeconomic assumptions and key data for the all-important measure. By rule, it is the House of Representatives that goes over the budget measure first, initially in the form of the National Expenditure Program (NEP). But in order to expedite the process and as part of tradition, the Senate simultaneously conducts its own hearings on the NEP, through the Committee on Finance.

This is the fifth budget measure that I am handling as Chairman of the Finance Committee and it is always a challenge to strike a balance between fulfilling limitless needs and working with limited funds. The 2024 proposed budget is no different. The requirements of the country remain the same but generating the revenues needed to fund these have become more challenging, particularly with the economy just recovering from over two years of inactivity as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

What is encouraging with the 2024 proposed budget is its focus as reflected in the theme "Agenda for Prosperity: Securing a Future-Proof and Sustainable Economy." Just like the State of the Nation Address of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the 2024 NEP is forward-looking and hews closely to the Medium Term Fiscal Framework, which the

Department of Finance describes as "the government's blueprint to steer the economy back to its high-growth trajectory."

Among the priorities of the 2024 budget is ensuring food security. Consumers have been dealing with rising prices of food, particularly rice, vegetables, pork and fish. This is the result of a combination of factors such as low production, high transport costs and bad weather. We were just hit by two successive typhoons that caused massive flooding and damage to agriculture in the Central Luzon and other parts of the country. This is while we are in the midst of El Niño, which is expected to bring about severe drought in most parts of the country in the coming months. Programs to support farmers and fisherfolk are included in the proposed budget to increase production and eventually, stabilize supply and

prices for the benefit of consumers.

Another priority in the 2024 budget is on reducing transport and logistics cost through various infrastructure projects as part of the Build Better More program of the administration. A significant amount of funding was proposed for the Department of Transportation to implement its Rail Transport, Land Public Transport, Aviation Infrastructure, and Maritime Infrastructure Programs. Most of the projects will not be completed in the near term but with funding provided under the proposed budget, we can be assured the implementation of these will continue and hopefully, be completed within their target dates.

And even though we are no longer in a pandemic, the 2024 budget provides for the continued strengthening of our country's health system. This includes the health facilities enhancement program and beefing up the operations of the Department of Health-run hospitals. On a sectoral basis, health has the third highest allocation, just behind education and public works. It is important to keep our health system prepared for future emergencies. We can no longer afford to be caught off guard when the next health crisis strikes.

The 2024 budget also recognizes the need to enhance the digital economy and the administration has proposed a corresponding 60 percent increase in the allocations for ICT and digitalization from the current year. This includes improving Internet access and speeds through the National Broadband Plan, the National Government Data Center Infrastructure

and the National Government Portal.

Programs related to flood control, water sufficiency, coastal and marine resources management and enhancing our forest cover are also included under the umbrella of promoting sustainability. Keeping our people and communities safe and ensuring that they have sufficient access to clean water are key priorities that have emerged and will require sustained interventions if we are to address these for the long term.

In line with our Tatak Pinoy or Proudly Pinoy advocacy, the budget measure contains funding for programs to advance research and development and innovation (R&D). This includes the continued support to the Innovation Fund, the R&D of our state universities and colleges, the Small Enterprises Technology Upgrading and the Science for Change Programs under the Department of Science and Technology.

In the coming weeks and months, the Finance Committee, with our very capable vice chairpersons, will start to dive into the proposed budgets of all government departments, agencies and offices. As what we have done in previous years, we will work non-stop with the goal of approving the measure on time and providing our people with the services that they deserve.

Senator Sonny Angara has been in public service for 18 years—9 years as Representative of the Lone District of Aurora, and 9 as Senator. He has authored, co-authored, and sponsored more than 330 laws. He is currently serving his second term in the Senate.

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Mayon logs highest sulfur dioxide emission

By ROMINA CABRERA and CET DEMATERA

A record-high volcanic sulfur dioxide emission has been recorded in Mayon Volcano since it was placed under Alert Level 3 in June.

The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) said 4,756 tons of sulfur dioxide emission were recorded on Wednesday.

Phivolcs noted that only 868 tons were recorded on Monday and 1,113 tons on Tuesday.

Paul Alanis, Phivolcs resident volcanologist at the Lignon Hill Observatory in Legazpi City, said massive degassing means that magma is being actively pushed to the surface.

Phivolcs said slow effusion of lava continued to feed the Bonga (southeastern), Mi-isi (south) and Basud (eastern) gullies in the past 24 hours.

Lava flow has reached 1.1 to 3.4 kilometers from the crater while debris reached four kilometers.

Seventy volcanic earthquakes, including three tremor events that lasted for one to 25 minutes, were recorded aside from 123 rockfall events and a pyroclastic density current.

"These fluctuating but still above the baseline values of abnormal parameters are telling us that there is no indication yet that the overall restive condition of Mayon is waning," Alanis told **The STAR**.

He denied reports that Phivolcs is considering lowering Mayon's alert level.

"These reports did not come from us. We don't see yet any indication of Mayon's abnormal condition now lowering," Alanis said.

He clarified that Mayon's chance of proceeding to an explosive eruption is slim because of the absence of enough energy and pressure from the prevailing abnormal parameters.

Phivolcs said Mayon remains under Alert Level 3, adding that entry into the six-kilometer permanent danger zone is prohibited.



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Changes to government procurement law sought

By **Ronnel W. Domingo**
@RonWDomingoINQ

The 20-year-old Government Procurement Law, or Republic Act No. 9184, needs to be amended if the problem of underspending will be addressed decisively since this is not simply a matter of inefficiency on the part of agencies, according to Budget Secretary Amenah Pangandaman.

In the second quarter of 2023, the Philippine gross domestic product grew year-on-year by 4.3 percent, much lower than the 6 percent that economists were expecting.

Compared to the first quarter, the domestic economy shrank by 0.9 percent.

This was partly blamed on a 7.1-percent contraction in government expenditures.

On Tuesday, Pangandaman told the Senate committee on fi-

nance that as of the end of June, there were P124 billion worth of outstanding bank checks—checks that have been written but not yet given or credited to suppliers and creditors.

The budget chief added that there were other factors, such as lower-than-programmed interest payments on the national government's financial obligations and unresolved right of way issues.

She said that there were also ongoing registration and validation of payees; procurement-related difficulties such as late delivery of goods and failed biddings due to withdrawal or disqualification of bidders, unavailability of competent suppliers, and lack of or late submission of supporting documents, among others.

On Thursday, Pangandaman said in a statement that amending RA 9184 will further

help government agencies address difficulties in procurement related to their programs, activities and projects—which is identified as one of the biggest bottlenecks in government spending.

She said proposed amendments to the law would be presented to President Marcos during next week's Cabinet meeting.

Spending plans

Meanwhile, government agencies are expected to turn in "catch-up" spending plans by Sept. 15, as "catch-up plans" to facilitate the implementation of the 2023 national budget for the remainder of the year.

"As what I would always emphasize, we consider budget utilization rates in evaluating the absorptive capacity of agencies," Pangandaman said.

"We view low (budget) utili-

zation rate (or BUR) as the agency's limited capacity to use new funds," she added. "However, those agencies who need to increase their utilization rates have promised to produce catch-up plans during the budget deliberations, so we hope that their BURs will increase by then."

Further, Pangandaman said the Department of Budget and Management has partnered with the Land Bank of the Philippines on the use of a digital government purchase card (GPC) for agencies' faster procurement of immediate miscellaneous expenses.

The use of the GPC is expected to cut the time needed to liquidate government transactions and promote reduced cash handling by government agencies, operational efficiency, transparency, and accountability in the disbursement of public funds. INQ