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Gov't, DENR finally addressing PH water infrastructure backlog

THE government is finally tackling the water infrastructure gap in the Philippines.

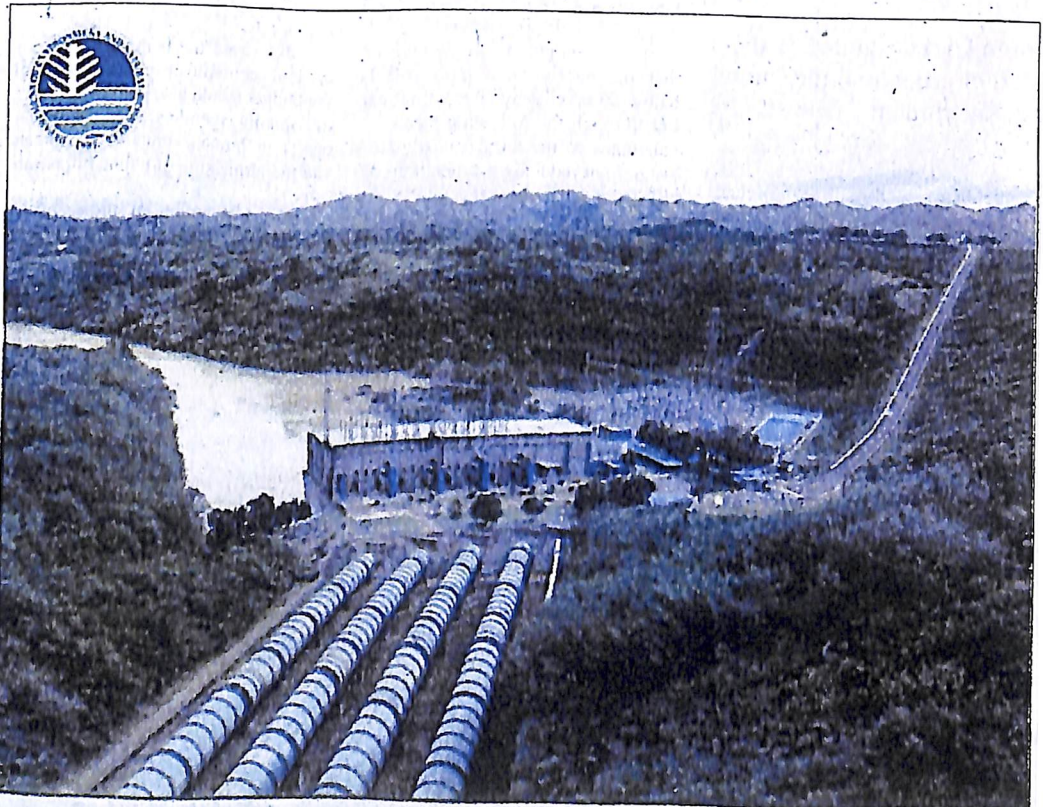
The Department of Environment and Natural Resources wants to refocus government's water security strategy to maximize the utilization of the country's resources through infrastructure projects with multi-purpose objectives.

Blessed with rich water resources, the Philippines is poor in infrastructure that can exploit and conserve its most precious asset. The advent of the El Niño weather phenomenon, or extended drought, earlier sent jitters to national and local government officials. The dry spell earlier led to water rationing in the capital region and dry irrigation canals in the provinces—a bane for Filipino farmers.

The DENR in a recent statement said the government was considering to tap water sources and recycle wastewater. It stressed the need for stable and steady water supply increases on the back of growing demand and the threat from the El Niño weather condition.

El Niño would have been a minor inconvenience for many Filipinos if policymakers and local government leaders treated the water supply quagmire with more resolve. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres earlier called on the world to safeguard water resources to avert conflict and ensure future global prosperity.

Water, according to the UN chief, is "the most precious common good" and "needs to be at the center of the global political agenda."



Between two and three billion people worldwide experience water shortages, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UN-Water in the latest edition of the UN World Water Development Report.

Environment Secretary Antonia Loyzaga said the DENR would work closely with other concerned government agencies such as the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), the National Economic and Development Authority, the Local Water Utilities Administration and the Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System

on the possibility of building public water supply facilities for multiple usage, including irrigation, power generation, industrial and commercial use as well as domestic consumption.

"We are looking at our respective budgets and our programs to see how we can design multipurpose infrastructure to actually serve the different needs of agriculture, power, water for domestic use, and for industry," Loyzaga said.

She said the DENR and DPWH were jointly studying the construction of more water collection and impounding systems as well as flood control structures as mitigation approaches to cli-

mate change and its impacts.

The Philippines' growing urban population, meanwhile, will remain mired in a Third World setting if the water infrastructure remains in the post World War II era.

For decades, Metro Manila and its adjacent provinces have solely relied on the water provided by the 50-year-old Angat Dam.

Loyzaga said water conservation and efficiency, along with multipurpose water infrastructure such as dams, reservoirs, sewage treatment plants, and irrigation canals would address water security challenges in the country. **RSE**



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Hoodwinked

IN A congressional hearing, DENR Sec. Toni Yulo Loyzaga was asked if there is a written order of suspension on the Manila Bay reclamation projects.

She replied that she had ordered work stoppage on the projects on the basis of the president's verbal directive.

It is important to have a written order that would define which are the projects, and which are suspended, since the president had earlier said only one project has been reviewed and deemed compliant with environmental impact assessment.

Which is it?

The projects were individually assessed. Instead of studying the combined impact of all the 22 reclamation proposals that are now on various stages of implementation, and which have belatedly been suspended and only after the US Embassy complained.

Which means, if a project encompasses say a total 300 hectares, then that will not create a destructive environmental impact on the bay's eco-system, from a stand-alone perspective.

But if PRA and the combined LGUs, along with their cohorts in DENR measured the impact of the totality, as Sec. Yulo-Loyzaga has stated, then the environmental effect is very different.

In street lingo, "ginoyo" tayo ng PRA and DENR, the present environment secretary excepted. The nearest descriptive in the English language is that those officials hoodwinked us all.



SO
I SEE
LITO
BANAYO

GM, who is doing the explaining, but his responses give rise to more and more questions.

The massive sand reclamation that we are seeing are those of SM, in joint venture with Pasay City, which is supposed to be 390 hectares; another Pasay joint venture, that of mega-contractor Charlie Gonzales of Ulticon Builders who formed a new Pasay Harbor City project covering 265 hectares; the Manila Solar City project of 148 hectares fronting the Coconut Palace; and that of Waterfront Development of the Gatchalians, which is right in front of the dolomite beach of Roy Cimatu, and covers the foreshore of the US Embassy.

I do not know if the Bacoor project of the Tiu-Laurel family has started actual work, nor the Navotas reclamation approved by the Tiangcos.

As far as I know, the Solar City project fronting the Coconut Palace, got its joint venture with Manila as far back as when Fred Lim was mayor.

But jurisdictional issues due to overlaps with Pasay delayed the project. It was finally given the go-signal in 2021.

The same is true with the Ulticon and SM reclamation projects, as well as Gatchalians' Waterfront development, which was approved by then Manila mayor Erap Estrada, along with the Horizon Manila reclamation project.

One will likewise recall that Pres. Duterte in his time stated that he was against any reclamation in the Manila Bay area, aware as he was that the Supreme Court, under a continuing "mandamus" writ, directed both the national and local governments to rehabilitate the bay and bring it back to its pristine level.

What happened to that stand? And why did the PRA approve despite that public avowal of the president then?

Certainly all these are not attributable to Pres. Marcos Jr., nor his DENR secretary, Mrs. Yulo-Loyzaga.

But some businessmen and even the renowned architect and urban planner Felino "Jun" Palafox have stated their fears that canceling the "approved" projects will have a negative effect on our investment climate.

It's again a case of the sanctity of contracts and business unpredictability in our country.

That is the legal conundrum that government faces, because agencies under previous administrations, local and national, botched their responsibilities to safeguard our environment, and simply have no pride of place.

Now let us go to the "sunk costs" that the proponents will no longer be able to recover if their reclamation project is cancelled: One, if they have begun reclaiming, as SM, Ulticon, and Solar have, the first two in advanced stages, the losses would be quite big.

“Then what we will be left with are ugly unutilized and uninhabited islands of dirty gray sand which will waft into our nostrils whenever a strong wind blows eastward.”

Now comes the PRA's OIC who came up with the "literal" justification the projects constitute only some 5 percent of the entire Manila Bay which he says is all of 200,000 hectares, as if that 5 percent is in the middle of the bay from Bataan to Cavite, and not an eyesore that obstructs the everyman's view of the bay and its fabled sunset, one of the free pleasures of living in this "broke-down" metropolis.

That's trying to hoodwink us even more.

It will take many, many years before the developers will be able to construct the peripheral roads around the new islands where the common tao will be able to get a view of the sunset.



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Meanwhile, that view will be confined to mountains of gray sand.

It should be interesting to find out when the individual projects were given their approval and notices to proceed by the PRA, and when the local governments concerned, whether Manila, Navotas, Pasay, Paranaque, Las Pinas, Bacoor, etc. gave approval to private developers on the basis of their municipal water jurisdictional authority, and thereafter apply with the PRA under the provisions of EO 74; and when the DENR, or whichever agency or instrumentality thereof, actually gave the ECC.

So, the local governments, whose view is always focused on more and greater real estate tax collections, on top of their share of the reclaimed land, went their merry way in approving reclamation proposals.

Then the PRA and the DENR gave their go-signal, almost all of the green lighting done in the last three or four years.

It is quite puzzling as well that as far as their website informs us, the PRA has no new chair and no new president, despite the fact that we are into the 14th month of the Marcos presidency.

In the early days of the new administration, people were already congratulating lawyer Ed Serapio who was rumored to be the Marcos appointee as chairman, and another lawyer, Jay Flaminiano, as the president of the PRA.

What happened?

Till now, it is Joseph Literal, an assistant

For those on the other hand who have yet to begin actual reclamation, the "sunk" cost will be the "padulas" or "pangiti" that they may have given to the officials who approved these, whether local government or the national agencies concerned.

Surely, these "pangiti" are way, way more than the value of a bunch of bananas, as in Binangonan.

To which many will simply say, "Beh, buti nga."

On the other hand, given the world economic recession, especially in the target markets of the real estate speculators, which are China, South Korea and perhaps a sprinkling of other foreigners, there really might be very little profitability in their ventures.

Then what we will be left with are ugly unutilized and uninhabited islands of dirty gray sand which will waft into our nostrils whenever a strong wind blows eastward.

Sec. Yulo-Loyzaga, who is highly admired for being a no-nonsense official with a scientific mind, has now become the cynosure of public attention.

How she goes about identifying which are non-compliant, or at what point these projects are "much too much" such that they impact on the bay's overall environment, the marine ecosystem, the livelihood of fishermen, and even the historic and cultural considerations in an uglified metropolis, will be keenly watched.

May the force be with her!



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Trusted Since 1898

The Manila Times

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Environment watchdog warns vs toxic school supplies

THE EcoWaste Coalition said it found toxic chemicals in a number of school supplies it tested recently.

The group said it conducted test buys to raise awareness about hazardous substances contained in some school supplies.

It said it collected 62 assorted crayons, water colors, pens, pencil cases, paper clips, lunch bags, backpacks, rain gears and school accessories from retail stores in the cities of Caloocan, Makati, Manila, Mandaluyong, Pasig and Quezon. It examined the products' labels and the products themselves for heavy metals using a portable X-ray fluorescence (XRF) device.

"Our investigation shows that most school supplies sold in the market have no labels or are poorly labeled, and some are even laced with hazardous chemicals that can contaminate children's environment and bodies and pose long-term health issues such as problems with brain development and behavior," Aileen Lucero, Ecowaste national coordinator, said.

"Children are most susceptible to toxic substances in the environment because they breathe more air, drink more water, and eat more food per kilogram of body weight and have fewer and less developed natural defenses compared to adults, resulting in greater exposures to toxicants, which can increase the risk of neurodevelopmental effects, immune system disorders, respiratory ailments and other diseases," Dr. Geminn Louis Apostol, an environmental health specialist from the Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health, said.

FRANCIS EARL CUETO



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OPINION

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ANA MARIE PAMINTUAN

Devalued property

Think about it: if a reclamation project blocks natural water passageways and causes regular massive flooding in your community, what happens to economic activities and the value of properties in the area?

The economy will tank, and property values all over will plummet. Owners will be hard-pressed to find buyers for their much devalued property.

Take it from someone whose family has made billions from property development. Sen. Cynthia Villar says her serious concern about flooding in her home turf of Las Piñas led to her battle against the Manila Bay reclamation near the city's shores.

The reclamation was initiated during the Ramos administration by Amari Coastal Bay Development Corp. through a deal with the Public Estates Authority (PEA), forerunner of the Philippine Reclamation Authority (PRA).

In 2002, upon the petition of then solicitor general Francisco Chavez, the Supreme Court nullified the sale of a 368-hectare property to Amari by the PEA.

Today the property in question along the Las Piñas-Parañaque coastal area is a lush ecotourism park – an officially designated protected wetland of international importance. The mangrove forest is home to numerous species of birds and serves as a marine sanctuary.

The 175-hectare wetland park is jointly administered by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), Tourism Infrastructure and Enterprise Zone Authority, Villar SIPAG and the Society for the Conservation of Philippine Wetlands.

On "The Chiefs" on Cignal TV's *One News*, where she became our first guest in our reformatted edition over the weekend, Villar was asked about the explanation of some local government officials for allowing massive reclamation projects in their sectors of Manila Bay.

The officials said the expanded land area would mean more business and livelihood activities for their cities, meaning more revenues and economic advancement.

Villar said the objective is fine, but the long-term destructive impact of the reclamation on the original land area cannot be ignored.

In Las Piñas, she said property values have risen by about tenfold in the past two decades. This could not have been possible, she said, if the Amari reclamation project had proceeded and blocked the four city waterways that open out into Manila Bay, causing massive flooding.

It's not just the communities inland that must contend with the environmental impact, but also people who make a living from the sea.

That area of Cavite from Kawit to Tanza, Noveleta and Cavite City should have been developed into a traditional fishing community, with numerous heritage sites beginning with the Aguinaldo shrine.

Instead massive reclamation projects may soon obliterate the fishing industry in those areas, and even the few beach resorts that have survived may soon be out of business.

I go to those coastal areas regularly to buy fresh shrimp and prawns, oysters, mussels and the best *tuyo* (not salty) and other dried fish. At the pace of reclamation activities, I'm afraid these livelihoods will soon vanish, like the sea view from Roxas Boulevard.



Some reports have pointed out that each bay reclamation project was assessed for individual environmental impact, when the cumulative effects of multiple reclamations on the bay ecological system should have been considered.

The cumulative assessment should have been possible because all the 22 reclamation projects in question were approved within just three years of the Duterte administration, starting after the PRA was placed under the Office of the President on Feb. 1, 2019.

The PRA clarified that only 13 projects are in Manila Bay. The DENR corrected this and said there are 15 in the bay affecting Metro Manila and seven affecting Region 4-A or Calabarzon (Cavite, Batangas, Laguna, Rizal and Quezon).

Whether it's 13 or 15, you've seen the ugly images of the reclamation work. As President Marcos put it, the sea has disappeared from Roxas Boulevard.

While everyone was distracted with the drastic cleanup of Boracay, the greater environmental threat was being laid down in Manila Bay.

Alongside the bay projects, rapid and massive reclamation activities were also undertaken and are still ongoing in Laguna de Bay, notably along the C-6 road running from Taguig to Taytay, Rizal.

The lake, already heavily silted from too many fishpens, is tapped to augment potable water sources in Metro Manila. The DENR may want to include those lake reclamation activities in its review.

DENR Secretary Antonia Yulo-Loyzaga is in an unenviable position, with tremendous pressure being exerted by powerful interests.

The most entertaining defense of the suspended projects is the mental acrobatics on what constitutes reclamation, and why we should even thank a proponent as our savior from flooding.

* * *

Villar's family businesses have also encountered controversy over land use, and the conversion of agricultural lands into mixed-use property development.

She explained to The Chiefs that her family develops property only in cities or capital towns. It's simply a business strategy, she said.

"Usually the developers don't build houses in the farmlands. Nobody will buy in the farmlands," she told us. "We only build in the cities. Who will buy homes in the farmlands?"

She acknowledges that even in cities, there may be areas classified as agrarian lands. But she points out that in cities, private owners are allowed to sell these lands for conversion to mixed-use property development. The sellers, she says, can then buy bigger lands for farming outside the city.

Such conversions of agricultural lands must be limited to cities, Villar said. She asked: "What's wrong with developing cities and keeping agriculture outside cities?"

She said the key is to make agriculture more competitive, through technology and improved farming methods that boost production.

One problem here is that more and more towns are being reclassified as cities. This situation may be addressed by the Land Use Act, whose House version has been passed on third and final reading this year.

The Villar Group does not buy land where it can't sell houses, Villar stressed. She pointed out that people also consider the resale value when they buy houses, and it's tough to sell houses outside cities.

"It's a law of supply and demand," Villar told us. "You will not buy (a house) if you cannot resell it."

And people won't buy property in a place known for flooding. She says this is a long-term consequence of massive bay reclamation activities that local governments may want to consider.

★



'INC Palawan mine site still open'

By JONATHAN L. MAYUGA
@jonlmayuga

IPILAN Nickel Corp. (INC) said its mine site in Brooke's Point, Palawan continues to operate even after the Supreme Court issued a Writ of Kalikasan last week.

The ruling does not interrupt INC's operations, as the petition for a Temporary Environmental Protection Order (TEPO) has been rejected, according to the company.

In acknowledging the SC Writ of Kalikasan, INC said it welcomes the order as "an opportunity to address and dispel recurring baseless allegations that have consistently been refuted by various governmental bodies."

"The petition against Ipilan is marked by distortions and inaccuracies, suggesting a motive to undermine Ipilan's legitimate operations by fueling anti-mining sentiments and deceiving the public," the company's statement read.

Contrary to the petitioner's claims, Ipilan said it has obtained a Certification Precondition exemption from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) in 2006.

Additionally, Proclamation No. 1815 (2009), which designated the Mt. Mantalingahan Mountain Range as a Protected Area, validates pre-existing contracts such as the Mineral Production Sharing Agreement with the government.

"It is important to note that the company refrains from mining within the overlapping area. The allegations related to tree-cutting activities were conducted under the authority of a valid permit, upheld by the court," INC said.

"Ipilan remains resolute in aligning its operations with the highest environmental and ethical standards, promoting sustainable practices and regulatory compliance. It is steadfast in its mission to responsibly harness natural resources, fostering local and national progress for the collective benefit of all stakeholders."

Last week, the NCIP issued a cease-and-desist order (CDO) against the nickel ore mining op-

erations of Celestial Nickel Mining Corp. and INC in Brooke's Point, Palawan.

According to the NCIP, the mining companies failed to secure a certification precondition and the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent from concerned indigenous people that have ancestral domain claim over in the area.

INC urged the NCIP to immediately revoke the CDO slapped by its satellite office in Mimaropa against the company.

The company said it has a "fruitful partnership" with the indigenous peoples' community and cited its "sincere efforts" to address royalty concerns in consultations with the NCIP.