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PH 'sound and improving'

PBBM: Despite rising threats, 'Bagong Pilipinas' has arrived



2ND SONA DONE. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. smiles to the crowd as House Speaker Martin Romualdez and Senate President Juan Miguel Zubel applaud after the Chief Executive's second State of the Nation Address on Monday at the Batasang Pambansa in Quezon City. Rowell Cortez

By Charles Dantes

PRESIDENT Ferdinand Marcos Jr. on Monday described the state of the nation as "sound and improving" despite rising hurdles, with inflation and the threat of the El Niño phenomenon among the biggest challenges.

In his second State of the Nation Address (SONA) to Congress, Mr. Marcos cited the country's growth momentum post-pandemic, buoyed by government efforts to improve agricultural production and infrastructure connectivity, among other achievements in his first 12 months in office.

The Chief Executive also said his government has enabled a more competitive workforce and created job opportunities for Filipinos, including returning OFWs, stamped out corruption and promoted transparency through digitalization programs, and ensured a strong and stable rule of law that gears the war on drugs toward rehabilitation and extending amnesty to rebel returnees.

"The state of the nation is sound and is improving. Dumating na ang bagong Pilipinas (The new Philippines has arrived).

Next page



PH...
From A1

rived)," the President told around 2,000 guests at the Batasang Pambansa in Quezon City.

While inflation remained high at 5.4 percent in June, he said it has already eased from 8.7 percent in January and is expected to be reduced further to 2.9 percent by next year.

"What this means is that in spite of all the difficulties, we are transforming the economy. We are stabilizing the prices of all critical commodities," he said.

"On matters of the economy, there are many things over which we have no control. But over those where we do have control, we are doing everything we can," the President said.

War on drugs, amnesty program

A strong and stable rule of law, the President said, will "strengthen the foundation of our transformation" as he renewed his policy statement that implementation of the war on drugs during his term will be unlike the bloody campaign waged by his predecessor, former President Rodrigo Duterte.

Duterte was absent from the SONA anew, unlike past Presidents Joseph Estrada and current Pampanga Rep. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who were in the VIP section hearing Mr. Marcos' 72-minute speech (see related story on A1 -- Editors).

"The campaign against illegal drugs continues—but it has taken on a new face. It is now geared towards community-based treatment, rehabilitation, education, and reintegration, to curb drug dependence amongst our affected citizenry," he said.

Mr. Marcos, however, warned "narco-cops" to submit their resignations immediately.

"Unscrupulous law enforcers and others involved in the highly nefarious drug trade have been exposed. I will be accepting their resignations. In their stead, we will install individuals with unquestionable integrity, who will be effective and trustworthy in handling the task of eliminating this dreaded and corrosive social curse. We cannot tolerate corruption or incompetence in government," the President added.

Mr. Marcos said he will likewise issue an amnesty proclamation for rebel returnees, citing the need for unity and social cohesion.

"To complete the reintegration process, I will issue a Proclamation grant-

ing amnesty to rebel returnees, and I ask Congress to support me in this endeavor," he said.

Food and water security

Mr. Marcos said the government will train its guns on smugglers and hoarders of agricultural products, which he said contribute to rising prices on top of inflation pressures.

"Not only farmers are affected, but consumers as well, that's why we won't allow such practice. The days of smugglers and hoarders are numbered," he said.

The President also asked Congress to pass new laws to amend the Fisheries Code and the Cooperative Code to boost agricultural output.

He said the country is also preparing for the full impact of the El Niño phenomenon as he ordered government agencies to improve buffer stock and implement cloud-seeding if necessary.

He also renewed his appeal to lawmakers to pass a law creating a Department of Water Resource Management.

"Water is as important as food. We have to ensure we have enough potable water for us and the next generation — including water for irrigation," he said.

"Considering its fundamental importance, water security deserves a special focus. Our efforts must not be scattered, but rather, cohesive, centralized, and systematic," the President added.

Build better infrastructure with Maharlika help

The President said a key element to post-pandemic economic rebound is the government's massive infrastructure program that covers 104 flagship projects in the areas of physical connectivity, water resources, agriculture, health, digital connectivity, and energy.

"Physical connectivity infrastructure—such as roads, bridges, seaports, airports, and mass transport—accounts for 83 percent of this program. Our infrastructure spending will stay at 5 to 6 percent of our GDP," he said.

In the pipeline, Mr. Marcos said, are the 1,200-kilometer Luzon Spine Expressway Network Program and the Mega-Bridge Program that includes the Bataan-Cavite Interlink Bridge, Panay-Guimaras-Negros Island Bridges, and the Samal Island-Davao City Connector Bridge.

The President said the Maharlika Investment Fund will provide strategic financing for high-priority projects "without the added debt burden" (see related story on A4 -- Editors).

"To ensure sound financial manage-

ment, a group of internationally recognized economic managers shall oversee the operations of the Fund, guided by principles of transparency and accountability. This guarantees that investment decisions will be based on financial considerations alone, absent any political influence," Mr. Marcos said.

Renewable energy is way forward

The President said his administration will aggressively promote renewable energy to meet the target of attaining a 35 percent share in the power mix by 2030 and then on to 50 percent by 2040.

"Renewable energy is the way forward," he said.

"The Malampaya project has been a boon to our country, energizing 20 percent of Luzon. The renewal of the contract guarantees continued revenues and energy production for another 15 years. But aside from Malampaya, we will also push for more gas exploration in other parts of the country," the President added.

Mr. Marcos, however, called the attention of the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines over 68 delayed grid connections.

"We are conducting a performance review of our private concessionaire, the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines. We look to NGCP to complete all of its deliverables, starting with the vital Mindanao-Visayas and Cebu-Negros-Panay interconnections," he said.

Learning recovery and 'Filippinovation'

As the country moves forward from the COVID-19 pandemic, Mr. Marcos said learning recovery becomes even more crucial as the government recalibrates the K-10 curriculum and amid the return to hybrid or full face-to-face classes.

"Everything begins with education... Learners will be made more resilient. Our public schools and facilities are being increased and fortified," he said.

A culture of innovation must be fostered, the President said.

"This is 'Filippinovation.' Science, technology and innovation will drive the quality and competitiveness of our workforce, as well as our manufacturing, export, creative, and service industries, in existing markets and in new ones waiting to be explored," he said.

Addressing health inequities

"We are now refocusing our health priorities, applying the lessons learned from the pandemic and addressing the

weaknesses that it has exposed. Healthier communities and lifestyles are our advocacy," the President said.

He cited the pilot Food Stamp Program which seeks to supply the nutrition needs of a million most food-poor Filipinos as he assured the public the government will also do a catch-up on the routine vaccinations that were affected by the pandemic.

"To address the current shortage of healthcare professionals in our country, and to help us achieve our goal of universal healthcare, we are greatly expanding our medical and nursing education programs. We will push the envelope even further. We are helping nursing graduates hurdle their board exams so that they will obtain their licenses and join our pool of healthcare professionals," the President said.

Data-driven fight vs. corruption

The President said the government will fully embrace digitalization to provide better service to the people, through its vital frontline services and its back-end functions.

"Digitalization will support the government's data-driven and science-based planning and decision-making. It is the greatest, most powerful tool, not just to improve the ease of doing business, but also against many forms of graft and corruption," he said.

"Consistent with this transformative policy direction, all government offices must then ensure that their vital services are digitized immediately," Mr. Marcos added.

Priority legislative measures

Mr. Marcos also listed 16 priority legislative measures for Congress to work on, namely:

- Excise tax on single-use plastics;
- VAT on digital services;
- Rationalization of mining fiscal regime;
- Motor vehicle user's charge/road user's tax;
- Military and Uniformed Personnel Pension;
- Amendment of the Fisheries Code;
- Amendment of the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act;
- Amendment of the Cooperative Code;
- New Government Procurement Law;
- New Government Auditing Code;
- Anti-financial accounts scamming;
- Tatak-Pinoy law;
- The Blue Economy law;
- Ease of paying taxes;
- LGU income classification; and
- Philippine Immigration Act.



07-25-23

TITLE: _____

PAGE _____

DATE _____

Congress asked: Pass audit, procurement bills

By JOVEE MARIE N. DELA CRUZ
@joveemarie

PRESIDENT Ferdinand Marcos Jr. on Monday called on Congress to pass his priority measures that will enhance government audits and procurement.

In his second State of the Nation Address (SONA), the President said a new government procurement law and government auditing code will empower the entire government, which is deemed a "transformative" solution amid the changing times.

"Once again, on this same principle, I urge Congress to enact a new Government Procurement Law and a new Government Auditing Code, to make government procurement and auditing more attuned to these

changing times," he said.

According to him, cooperation is "key" within and among government agencies, the public and private sectors, business and academia, the government and foreign partners, and Filipinos themselves.

"We need the help and skills of the whole government and entire nation. And so, we shall do the same for the next five years. We seek not only to become more effective, but more, to become truly transformative," he said.

He said that this strategy would be put into practice through inter-agency collaboration, coordinated efforts across the three levels of government, and independent constitutional entities.

SEE "CONGRESS," A2



Congress...CONTINUED FROM A1

07-25-23

DATE

TITLE:

He added that private sector advisory councils and national-local mechanisms have also been organized to establish the needed linkages.

Marcos said the Mandanas-Garcia ruling of the Supreme Court in 2018, which reflects the mandate of the Constitution and the Local Government Code, will take effect "soonest" to improve collaboration between the LGUs and the national government.

Marcos said all of the LGUs' necessary devolution transition plans have been completed.

"To fully prepare them for optimal devolution, the necessary technical and financial assistance is being extended to our local governments. In everything that we do, the enduring Filipino quality of Bayanihan will be our guide," he added.

Fisheries code

MEANWHILE, the President also urged Congress to pass amendments to the Fisheries Code.

"Our Fisheries Code must be revisited to incorporate and strengthen science-based analysis and determination of fishing areas. This approach will protect both the interests of our fisherfolk and our fisheries and aquatic resources," he said.

"To this end, we will seek the support of Congress to amend the Code to guarantee sustainable development of our fisheries sector in harmony with environmental balance," he added.

Marcos also asked Congress to pass the Tatak-Pinoy (Proudly Filipino) Law and the Blue Economy Law.

The proposed Tatak Pinoy Law, filed by Sen. Sonny Angara, seeks to enhance the capabilities and standards of local industries, level up the country's exports, create jobs, and ultimately make the economy more vibrant and competitive with the rest of the world.

The Blue Economy Law, pending in the House, seeks to serve as the basis for marine spatial planning, the determination of investments to enhance maritime domain awareness, the preservation of the value and sustainability

of ocean resources, and their protection from threats such as land-based pollution and over-fishing.

To maximize the economic and social benefits of Philippine maritime industries, Rep. Jose Francisco Benitez of Negros Occidental filed House Bill 69 to prioritize programs that promote the blue economy in the interest of national economic security.

Benitez explained that the blue economy is a framework for sustainable development of marine and coastal resources based on principles of stewardship and social responsibility.

House Bill 69, if passed into law, will strengthen interagency coordination and planning to identify the best use of maritime zones, including the EEZ, promote blue finance or funding for special economic zones concentrating on sustainable and strategic maritime industries, and enhance maritime domain awareness to flag threats to our marine environment, including unauthorized access, overexploitation, and pollution.

Marcos also pushed for the passage of essential tax measures under the Medium-Term Fiscal Framework, including an excise tax on single-use plastics, a VAT on digital services, the rationalization of the mining fiscal regime, a motor vehicle user's charge or road user's tax, and the Military and Uniformed Personnel Pension.

All these tax bills and the MUP are now in advanced stages in the House.

Also, the President said the bills creating the Department of Water Resources and Services, the amendment of the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act, the amendment of the Cooperative Code, the Anti-Financial Account Scamming Act, and the proclamation granting amnesty to rebel returnees must be passed. All these bills are currently under deliberation in the lower house.

Marcos also asked Congress to give its nod to bills easing the payment of taxes, LGU income classification, and the Philippine Immigration Act. Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez said these three bills, which are part of the LEDAC priorities, will be approved this year.



STRATEGIC
COMMUNICATION
AND
INITIATIVES
SERVICE

TITLE: _____

PAGE _____

DATE _____

Protect VIP: Oil spill crisis not yet over

Group insists the President needs to review gov't claim as residue, tar balls still visible in some areas in Oriental Mindoro

By **Delfin T. Mallari Jr.**
and **Madonna T. Virola**
@InquirerLuzon

LUCENA CITY—Environment advocate group Protect the Verde Island Passage (Protect VIP) on Monday challenged President Marcos to address his government's "lackluster response" to the first major environmental disaster confronting his administration.

"As the President's first year in office concludes, we challenge the Marcos administration not to prove itself as a government that settles for hollow wins in the oil spill crisis... turning a blind eye to the ailing health of the VIP," the Protect VIP said in a statement issued on Monday, hours before President Marcos gave his State of the Nation Address.

The group maintained that thousands of fishing families continue to reel from the effect of the Feb. 28 oil spill caused by MT Princess Empress, which sank while carrying some 800,000 liters of industrial fuel in the waters of Naujan town in Oriental Mindoro.

The incident, considered the first marine environmental crisis under the Marcos administration, caused a massive oil spill that affected coastal areas in Oriental Mindoro and Batangas, both of which are within the VIP corridor, as well as those in Antique and Palawan provinces.

Known as the "center of global shorefish biodiversity" due to the high densities of marine resources, the VIP is a 1.14-million-hectare marine ecosystem located off the coastlines of Batangas, Romblon, Marinduque, Occidental Mindoro and Oriental Mindoro provinces.



OUTDOOR PLAYTIME A child of a fisherman at Barangay Lazareto in City of Calapan spends her free time along the shoreline in this photo taken on Monday. The girl is unmindful of the oil spill that hit a large part of Oriental Mindoro in February, with fishers still reeling from its effects. —**MADONNA T. VIROLA**

According to Protect VIP, the oil spill in the VIP has so far "disrupted the livelihoods and well-being of hundreds of thousands, caused billions in damage, and harmed the world's most biodiverse marine habitat," as the tragedy nearly marked its fifth month.

"We are gravely alarmed by the increasing pronouncements of government agencies and bodies, both local and national, to brand this situation as already resolved," the green group said.

Fishing ban

The Philippine Coast Guard had declared that oil removal and recovery operations in the affected areas were already complete.

Over the last few months, fishing bans were lifted in Oriental Mindoro, leaving Pola, the ground zero of the oil spill, as the last town to still enforce the ban.

On July 20, Oriental Mindoro Gov. Humerlito Dolor

announced the final lifting of the ban in Pola based on the recommendations of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR).

"We are concerned by the lack of transparency on the scientific basis and methodologies employed by the government to order such lifting of fishing bans," Protect VIP lamented.

The group noted that the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office of the Province of Oriental Mindoro had also sent out invitations "for a demobilization ceremony to announce the termination of the oil spill response."

It recalled that over a month ago, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources published a situational report that still found oil and grease, hydrogen sulfide, and volatile organic compounds in Pola.

Protect VIP also questioned the BFAR test results, noting that the examinations "are not substantiated by published re-

ports that would establish the conduct of a robust quantitative test."

The group also noted that BFAR's oil spill bulletin failed to show the comprehensive results of water testing in terms of oil and grease for water quality assessment and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) in fish samples.

Water quality

Saying the presence of PAHs, some of which are carcinogenic, is of significant concern, Protect VIP said these could "bioaccumulate in fish and cause harm if consumed over a prolonged period of time."

The group said they conducted a rapid water quality assessment last week in six marine protected areas in Pinamalayan and Pola.

"It revealed that five of them exceeded water quality guidelines for oil and grease in protected areas," the group emphasized.

It claimed that oil residue and tar balls are also still visible in some areas.

"These results lead us to question if the motivation behind the lifting of bans and similar efforts to conclude oil spill responses are genuinely in the service of returning the livelihood of fisherfolk, or is it a hasty and dangerous decision made to provide the Marcos administration means to claim a superficial success in its oil spill response efforts?" Protect VIP asked.

The group added: "With the latter, the authorities whose duty it is to prioritize the plight of fishermen and the consuming public are instead doing them a grave injustice by risking their health." **INQ**



GOVT URGED TO REVIEW OUTCOME OF MINDORO OIL

SPILL CLEANUP

ENVIRONMENTAL and climate justice advocates belonging to Protect VIP on Monday urged President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. to thoroughly assess and address the first major environmental disaster confronting his administration.

The group said that nearly marking its fifth month, the oil spill that has reached the Verde Island Passage, has so far disrupted the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of people and is causing billions in damages.

Worse, they said, the oil spill may have caused harm to the world's most bio diverse marine habitat.

The group issued the statement on the occasion of this year's State of the Nation Address by Marcos.

"We are gravely alarmed by increasing pronouncements of government agencies and bodies, both local and national, to brand this situation as already resolved," the group said.

The group noted that over the last few months, fishing bans were lifted in Oriental Mindoro, leaving Pola, the ground zero of the oil spill, as the last town with an enforced ban.

Last July 20, Governor Humerlito Dolor announced the lifting of the ban in Pola based on recommendations of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR).

The Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office of the Province of Oriental Mindoro (PDRRMO) has also sent out invitations for a demobilization ceremony to announce the termination of the oil spill response, even without so much as publishing the final assessment report supposedly conducted by technical experts and representatives

from national agencies, the group lamented.

The group added they are one with all fisherfolk and adjacent sectors in demanding the return of livelihood and day-to-day normalcy.

However, the group is concerned by the alleged lack of transparency on the scientific basis and methodologies employed by the government to order such lifting of fishing bans.

"It was over a month ago since the Department of Environment and Natural Resources [DENR] last published a situational report, which still found oil and grease, hydrogen sulfide, and volatile organic compounds in Pola. As for the BFAR, its water quality tests are not substantiated by published reports that would establish the conduct of a robust quantitative test. BFAR's oil spill bulletin does not show the comprehensive results of water testing in terms of oil and grease for water quality assessment and Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons [PAHs] in fish samples," the group noted.

According to Protect VIP, the presence of PAHs, some of which are carcinogenic, is of significant concern: they can bio accumulate in fish and cause harm if consumed over a prolonged period of time.

A rapid water quality assessment conducted by Protect VIP this past week in six marine protected areas (MPAs) in Pinamalayan and Pola revealed that five of them exceeded water quality guidelines for oil and grease in protected areas. Oil residue and tar balls are also still visible, such as on the rocky shores of Barangay Puting Cacao in Pola which is near the St. John the Baptist Reserve MPA and the sandy beaches of Sitio Kabilang Ibayo in Barangay, Batuhan.

The interconnectivity of marine life and spillover of fish stock suggests that the quality of these MPAs can greatly influence neighboring water bodies as they serve as sanctuaries and nesting grounds. Water and fish stock flow freely across water bodies and can be influenced by the high presence of oil and grease.



Mayon logs more low-frequency volcanic quakes

By ELLALYN V. RUIZ

The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) recorded more volcanic earthquakes around Mayon Volcano between Sunday, July 23, and Monday, July 24.

In its bulletin issued on Monday, Phivolcs said 184 low-frequency volcanic quakes (LFVQs) were recorded by the Mayon Volcano Network.

This is an increase from the five LFVQs in the previous 24-hour monitoring.

Moreover, Mayon had four pyroclastic density currents (PDCs) and 156 rockfall occurrences.

"In the past 24-hour period, slow effusion of lava from the summit crater of Mayon Volcano continued to feed and bulk up established lava

flows on the Mi-isi, Basud, and Bonga gullies," it added.

Lava flows on the Mi-isi, Basud, and Bonga gullies on Mayon's southern, eastern, and southeastern flanks have maintained distal lengths of approximately 2.8 kilometers (kms), 600 meters, and 2.8 kilometers, respectively.

Phivolcs also noted that debris was still deposited within four kilometers of the crater from rockfall and Pyroclastic Density Currents (PDCs) caused by the collapses of the lava flow margins and the summit dome.

Given these observations, Phivolcs said Mayon Volcano remains on Alert Level 3, which means it is still in a relatively high level of unrest and that a potentially hazardous eruption may occur within weeks or even days.

Communities near the restive volcano are recommended to maintain increased vigilance against lahars and sediment-laden stream flows on channels draining the volcano edifice, as heavy rainfall could cause channel-confined lahars and sediment-laden stream flows.

Since Mayon Volcano's status was upgraded twice in the past month, first to Level 2 on June 5 and then to Level 3 on June 8, Phivolcs strongly advised that entry into the six-kilometer Permanent Danger Zone be strictly prohibited.

It warned that ash fall may occur in areas south of Mayon Volcano due to current wind patterns.

Phivolcs advised pilots to avoid flying near the volcano's summit because ash from a sudden eruption can be dangerous to aircraft.



Wind signals raised in Luzon, Visayas areas

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) yesterday placed several areas in Luzon and the Visayas under wind signal No. 2, while signal 1 was raised in Metro Manila and other provinces amid the threat of Typhoon Egay.

At a briefing, PAGASA assistant weather specialist chief Chris Perez added that Typhoon Egay (Doksuri) may still develop into a super typhoon, adding that wind signals may reach No. 4 or 5 when it reaches the Batanes and Babuyan Island areas.

Perez said Egay is expected to leave the Philippine area of responsibility (PAR) by Thursday.

He said Egay further intensified as it moved westward over the Philippine Sea.

"At 10 a.m., the center of the eye of Typhoon Egay was located 525 kilometers east of Baler, Aurora.

The center is still far, but because of the wide clouds it covers, the eastern portion of Luzon and the Visayas will experience rains brought by Egay. It has maximum sustained winds of 150 kilometers per hour near the center and gustiness of up to 185 kph," he said.

According to Perez, Typhoon Egay

will continue to move slowly in the next 24 hours. "On the other hand, areas in the western part of the country, particularly the western section of Southern Luzon and the Visayas will be affected by the enhanced southwest monsoon."

Perez said based on the latest forecast of PAGASA, this morning Egay is expected to be located 300 kms. east of Tuguegarao city and by Wednesday it is expected to be in the coastal waters of Calayan, Cagayan.

"By Thursday morning, it is expected to exit PAR with a distance of 240 kms. west of Itbayat, Batanes, and by Friday, it is possible it will be located at the southeastern part of China with distance of 595 kms. northwest of Itbayat," he said.

Perez said among the areas covered by wind signal 2 were Catanduanes, central and eastern portion of Isabela, eastern portion of Albay; eastern portion of Camarines Sur, northern portion of Aurora, eastern portion of Quirino, eastern and central portion of Cagayan and northern portion of Camarines Norte.

In the Visayas, covered by wind signal 2 was the northeastern portion of Northern Samar, PAGASA added.

On the other hand, aside from Metro Manila, signal 1 was hoisted in Sorsogon, the rest of Albay, rest

of Camarines Sur, rest of Camarines Norte, rest of Isabela, rest of Cagayan including Babuyan Islands, Apayao, Abra, Kalinga, Mountain Province, Ifugao, rest of Quirino, Nueva Vizcaya, Batanes, Masbate including Ticao Island, Burias Island, Quezon including Polillo Islands, rest of Aurora, Benguet, Ilocos Sur, Ilocos Norte, La Union, Nueva Ecija, Pangasinan, Tarlac, Zambales, Bulacan, Pampanga, Bataan, Marinduque, Cavite, Rizal, Laguna, eastern and central portion of Romblon and northern and central portions of Batangas.

In Visayas, wind signal 1 was also raised in Eastern Samar, rest of Northern Samar, Samar, Biliran, northern and central portion of Leyte and northern portion of Cebu including Bantayan and Camotes Islands.

"When wind signal is raised like Metro Manila, it is possible that the effect of Typhoon Egay is still not felt as we have a lead time of 36 hours or less so that affected residents can prepare. Areas near the center of Typhoon Egay can experience the effect of the typhoon, possibly within 24 hours," Perez said.

He said areas affected by wind signal 2 and 1 may increase depending on the movement of the typhoon.

"By Tuesday, the accumulated rainfall could reach more than 200



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millimeters in Batanes, Babuyan Island, Ilocos Norte and northwestern portion of Abra. Accumulated rainfall of 100 to 200 millimeters of rain is expected in the northern portion of mainland Cagayan, Apayao, rest of Abra and Ilocos Sur," Perez said.

He said that around 50 to 100 millimeters of rain are expected for the rest of Cordillera Administrative Region and the rest of Ilocos region.

"By Tuesday until Wednesday afternoon, 50 to 100 millimeters of rain will be experienced for the rest of CAR, Pangasinan and Zambales," he noted.

Perez added that the southwest monsoon will affect areas in Southern Luzon particularly Occidental Mindoro, northern part of Palawan and areas in Western Visayas.

"By Wednesday and Thursday, heavy rains are expected in Northern Luzon and the Bicol region and in Central and Southern Luzon and the Visayas because of the southwest monsoon," he said.

Perez also warned of possible storm surge in coastal communities in Batanes, Cagayan, Ilocos Norte and Isabela.

"Gale warning was also raised in Batanes, northern and eastern portion of Luzon and Visayas, and northeastern part of Mindanao;

Southern Luzon, Camarines provinces, Catanduanes, Albay, Sorsogon, Romblon and Marinduque," he said.

The provincial government of Catanduanes on Monday suspended classes in public schools and work in government offices amid the threat of Typhoon Egay.

Sea, air travel

The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) has temporarily suspended travel of small vessels in Southern Quezon after storm signal No. 1 was raised yesterday due to Typhoon Egay.

PCG-Southern Quezon Commander Janus Robinson Sabas said the suspension covers the towns of Pitogo, San Andres, Buenavista, San Francisco, Calauag, Lopez, Catanauan, Mulanay, Guinayangan, Unisan, General Luna, Plaridel, Quezon, Alabat, Padre Burgos, Macalelon, Mauban, Perez, Agdanganan, Gumaca, Atimonan and Tagkawayan.

The Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines said that Bicol International Airport operations remain normal, with no advice yet from airlines of any flight cancellation.

At Virac Airport, the Cebu Pacific Manila-Virac-Manila flight was cancelled as of 8 a.m. yesterday.

- With Michelle Zoleta, Rudy Santos



STRATEGIC
COMMUNICATION
AND
INITIATIVES
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TITLE: _____

PAGE _____

DATE _____

SEA TRAVEL, CLASSES SUSPENDED

11 REGIONS FEEL IMPACT OF 'EGAY'

By Jerome Aning
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The Office of Civil Defense (OCD) on Monday said it was monitoring 6,748 barangays in 11 regions, including Metro Manila, affected by Typhoon "Egay" (international name: Doksuri) and the intensified "habagat" or southwest monsoon.

At Monday's Laging Handa briefing, OCD spokesperson Edgar Posadas said local and regional authorities were on top of the situation and had not yet sought the national government's assistance.

The affected barangays, as identified in a predisaster risk assessment the other day, are found in much of Luzon—the Cordillera, Ilocos, Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque,

Romblon, Palawan), Calabarzon (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, Quezon) and Bicol regions—and the entirety of the Visayas: Western, Eastern and Central Visayas regions.

In Metro Manila, it is "possible" that some 1,400 barangays would be affected by the inclement weather, he said.

But there were also reports of the storm's impact reaching Mindanao.

In the coastal city of Cabadbaran in Agusan del Norte, landing craft tank Pacifica 2 ran aground due to bad weather brought by Egay, according to the Philippine Coast Guard. All 24 crew members were rescued.

Evacuations

Posadas said the OCD had received updates on residents being evacuated and was ver-

ifying landslides reported in Western Visayas.

In Catanduanes province, floods have forced the evacuation of 10 families (51 people).

Amid heavy rain in Camarines Sur, the provincial disaster risk reduction and management council also urged residents in high-risk areas to evacuate.

In Albay province, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) said it would continue its lahar alerts in areas around Mayon Volcano.

According to Phivolcs officer in charge Teresito Bacolcol, his agency's personnel have so far found no volcanic material being "remobilized" by the rain.

"[But residents] living near... river channels should stay alert and be ready to move to higher ground if they experi-

ence continuous and torrential rainfall," he said.

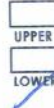
In Western Visayas, a total of 96 families (348 people) have so far been evacuated.

Elsewhere in Bicol and other parts of Luzon, sea travel have been suspended since Sunday due to huge waves and rough seas.

Some 3,000 passengers in Bicol, Calabarzon, Mimaropa and Eastern Visayas have been stranded.

Around 11,000 people or 3,300 families have been affected by the southwest monsoon and Egay, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council said in a report.

—REPORTS FROM JEROME ANING, CARMELA REYES-ESTROPE, DELFIN T. MALLARI JR., FRANCES MANGOSING AND MA. APRIL MIER-MANJARES INQ



TITLE:

PAGE:

Opinion

Fukushima nuclear plant water release within weeks raises worries about setbacks to businesses

By MARI YAMAGUCHI
The Associated Press

IWAKI, Japan—Beach season has started across Japan, which means seafood for holidaymakers and good times for business owners. But in Fukushima, that may end soon.

Within weeks, the tsunami-hit Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant is expected to start releasing treated radioactive wastewater into the sea, a highly contested plan still facing fierce protests in and outside Japan.

The residents worry that the water discharge 12 years after the nuclear disaster could deal another setback to Fukushima's image and hurt their businesses and livelihoods.

"Without a healthy ocean, I cannot make a living," said Yukinaga Suzuki, a 70-year-old innkeeper at Usuiso beach in Iwaki about 50 kilometers (30 miles) south of the plant. And the government has yet to announce when the water release will begin.

It's not yet clear whether, or how, damaging the release will be. But residents say they feel "shikataganai"—meaning helpless.

Suzuki has requested officials to hold the plan at least until the swimming season ends in mid-August.

"If you ask me what I think about the water release, I'm against it. But there is nothing I can do to stop it as the government has one-sidedly crafted the plan and will release it anyway," he said. "Releasing the water just as people are swimming at sea is totally out of line, even if there is no harm."

The beach, he said, will be in the path of treated water traveling south on the Oyashio current from off the coast of Fukushima Daiichi.

The government and the operator, Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings, or TEPCO, have struggled to manage the massive amount of contaminated water accumulating since the 2011 nuclear disaster, and announced plans to release it to the ocean during the summer.

They say the plan is to treat the

water, dilute it with more than a hundred times the seawater and then release it into the Pacific Ocean through an undersea tunnel. Doing so, they said, is safer than national and international standards require.

Suzuki is among those who are not fully convinced by the government's awareness campaign that critics say only highlights safety. "We don't know if it's safe yet," Suzuki said. "We just can't tell until much later."

The Usuiso area used to have more than a dozen family-run inns before the disaster. Now, Suzuki's half-century old Suzukame, which he inherited from his parents 30 years ago, is the only one still in business after surviving the tsunami. He heads a safety committee for the area and operates its only beach house.

Suzuki says his inn guests won't mention the water issue if they cancel their reservations and he would only have to guess. "I serve fresh local fish to my guests, and the beach house is for visitors to rest and chill out. The ocean is the source of my livelihood."

The March 11, 2011, earthquake and tsunami destroyed the Fukushima Daiichi plant's cooling systems, causing three reactors to melt and contaminating their cooling water, which has since leaked continuously. The water is collected, filtered and stored in some 1,000 tanks, which will reach their capacity in early 2024.

The government and TEPCO say the water must be removed to make room for the plant's decommissioning, and to prevent accidental leaks from the tanks because much of the water is still contaminated and needs retreatment.

Katsumasa Okawa, who runs a seafood business in Iwaki, says those tanks containing contaminated water bother him more than the treated water release. He wants to have them removed as soon as possible, especially after seeing "immense" tanks occupying much of the plant complex during his visit few years ago.

An accidental leak would be "an ultimate strikeout... It will cause actual damage, not reputation," Okawa says. "I think the treated water release is unavoidable." It's eerie, he

adds, to have to live near the damaged plant for decades.

Fukushima's badly hit fisheries community, tourism and the economy are still recovering. The government has allocated 80 billion yen (\$573 million) to support still-feeble fisheries and seafood processing and combat potential reputation damage from the water release.

His wife evacuated to her parents' home in Yokohama, near Tokyo with their four children, but Okawa stayed in Iwaki to work on reopening the store. In July 2011, Okawa resumed sale of fresh fish—but none from Fukushima.

Local fishing was returning to normal operation in 2021 when the government announced the water release plan.

Fukushima's local catch today is still about one-fifth of its pre-disaster levels due to a decline in the fishing population and smaller catch sizes.

Japanese fishing organizations strongly opposed Fukushima's water release, as they worry about further damage to the reputation of their seafood as they struggle to recover. Groups in South Korea and China have also raised concerns, turning it a political and diplomatic issue. Hong Kong has vowed to ban the import of aquatic products from Fukushima and other Japanese prefectures if Tokyo discharges treated radioactive wastewater into the sea.

China plans to step up import restrictions and Hong Kong restaurants began switching menus to exclude Japanese seafood. Agricultural Minister Tetsuro Nomura acknowledged some fishery exports from Japan have been suspended at Chinese customs, and that Japan was urging Beijing to honor science.

"Our plan is scientific and safe, and it is most important to firmly convey that and gain understanding," TEPCO official Tomohiko Mayuzumi told The Associated Press during its plant visit. Still, people have concerns and so a final decision on the timing of the release will be "a political decision by the government," he said.

Japan sought support from the International Atomic Energy Agency for transparency and credibility. IAEA's final report, released this month and handed directly to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, concluded that the method meets international standards and its environmental and health impacts would be negligible. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi said radioactivity in the water would be almost undetectable and there is no cross-border impact.

Scientists generally agree that environmental impact from the treated water would be negligible, but some call for more attention on dozens of low-dose radionuclides that remain in the water, saying data on their long-term effect on the environment and marine life is insufficient.

Radioactivity of the treated water is so low that once it hits the ocean it will quickly disperse and become almost undetectable, which makes pre-release sampling of the water important for data analysis, said University of Tokyo environmental chemistry professor Katsumi Shozugawa.

He said the release can be safely carried out and trusted "only if TEPCO strictly follows the procedures as planned." Diligent sampling of the water, transparency and broader cross-checks—not just limited to IAEA and two labs commissioned by TEPCO and the government—is key to gaining trust, Shozugawa said.

Japanese officials characterize the treated water as a tritium issue, but it also contains dozens of other radionuclides that leaked from the damaged fuel. Though they are filtered to legally releasable levels and their environmental impact deemed minimal, they still require close scrutiny, experts say.

TEPCO and government officials say tritium is the only radionuclide inseparable from water and is being diluted to contain only a fraction of the national discharge cap, while experts say heavy dilution is needed to also sufficiently lower concentration of other radionuclides.