

Written by Ado Paglinawan

Monday, 07 April 2008 05:25 - Last Updated Monday, 07 April 2008 05:58

To the uninformed, should we, considering the Philippine national agricultural budget and the salient programs that were supposedly paid by it, be in this situation 11 years after – mired in a rice crisis, milk crisis, fish crisis, etc?

Definitely, we Filipinos cannot confess to be idiots when it comes to agriculture. We have trained all our Asian neighbors about how to succeed in tilling the land and harvesting the treasures of the sea. The developed countries look up to us and that is why the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) for grains and SEAFDEC for aquaculture have been established by multilateral institutions in Laguna and Iloilo, respectively. The University of the Philippines in Los Baños, Laguna, and the Central Luzon State University in Munoz, Nueva Ecija, are hallmarks in the international aggie community.

I also discovered during my two-year experience as consultant to the Agriculture Secretary from 2002 to 2004 the heroism of many of our agri PhDs who have remained in the country despite difficult living conditions when they could seek better higher-paying employment abroad.

As of 2004, the Philippines was already at least 97% self-sufficient in rice and 78% self-sufficient in corn. Then what happened next?

How many of us for instance, know that our scientists from Munoz were the ones who developed the GET-EXCEL tilapia that has made us now the third-largest tilapia producer in the world? This breed can grow to palm-size every three months, thus harvestable for table consumption four times a year. The President gave us one year to put up 14 regional hatcheries all over the country. We did it in six months. Notably, I see Philippine-grown tilapia fillets in Safeways, Giants and Shoppers Foodwarehouses right here in Washington, DC.

How many of us know that as of 2004, we were already at least 97% self-sufficient in rice and 78% self-sufficient in corn? For the four years since then, we could have already been a net exporter of rice and self-sufficient in corn.

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What happened? There is only one dominant name from 2004 to 2008, that of Arthur Yap, the Secretary of Agriculture.

Note that the majority of the agricultural modernization program was championed by former President Estrada and then Senate President Angara. The program then was administered by Gloria Macapagal Arroyo from 2001 to 2007. She was in-charge for seven out of the last 10 years. Note that the program could not be funded immediately and the bulk of the funds was only made available just as President Erap was leaving (forced out of the) office.

President Gloria Arroyo was in-charge for seven out of the last 10 years (from 2001 to 2007). She cannot blame anybody else but herself for all the agriculture crises.

I can only surmise that the majority of the P145 billion never made it to its intended destination. As of now the P3-billion (pesos) had been discovered to have landed in the hands of then Agriculture Secretary Jocjoc Bolante, the alter ego then of the First Gentleman. The 3-billion pesos were used to steal the 2004 elections. UP Law Center's Harry Roque has also reported that the Commission on Audit (COA) is looking for the whereabouts of the P5-billion in hog-dispersal loans that were distributed after 2004. And what about the missing P3-billion irrigation fund spent in 2007? I guess many more (scandals) will come out in the open, as we see the sunset years of Gloria's presidency.

I do not think that President Arroyo can account for this agri-fund of P145 billion. I will not be surprised if the \$167-million that was used by a certain "Figaro" to buy a Bayfront real-estate property in San Francisco (California) also came from the agri fund. What about the reported villa in Spain and the resort in Portugal?

Could "Figaro" stand for First Gentleman Arroyo? I do not know. And what is a lawyer doing as Secretary of Agriculture, except perhaps as a replacement of the now-discredited Jocjoc Bolante?

Those of you who read this report (and who know something scandalous) better report it now, otherwise you will be dealing with history, no longer news. Here is the latest (stale) news from

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the Philippine Star . . .

Where did P145-B agri fund go?

By Jess Diaz

Tuesday, April 8, 2008 Philippine Star

Rep. Satur Ocampo of the militant party-list group Bayan Muna is asking where the P145 billion that Congress appropriated for the agriculture modernization program between 1997 and 2007 went.

He said that despite the expenditure of such a huge amount of taxpayers' money, the country is still facing a rice crisis.

Ocampo added that the modernization program, aimed principally at boosting rice production, was "a complete failure as exemplified by the looming rice crisis."

Congressman Ocampo says that despite the expenditure of such a huge amount of taxpayers' money for agriculture, the country is still facing a rice crisis.

"The Filipino people are now bearing the burden caused by the government's so-called agricultural modernization program," he said.

Ocampo said Malacañang should account for the huge amount of public funds spent to modernize the farming sector.

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Like Pangasinan Rep. Jose de Venecia Jr., Ocampo blamed the country's failure to become rice self-sufficient on the government's rice importation policy.

"Due to President Arroyo's rice importation policy, unscrupulous rice traders further justify to pull the prices of palay to an average of P8-P9 per kilo at the farmgate and totally undermined efforts of farmers to increase production. This buying rate could hardly enable farmers to recover production costs," he said.

Last week, the President ordered the National Food Authority to match the P17-P18 buying prices of private traders.

"The current rice crisis shows that the Arroyo government's rice importation policy completely failed, even in the field of stabilizing prices in the market," Ocampo said.

Earlier, De Venecia said that a large part of the P145 billion for the agriculture modernization program was misspent.

Data released last week by the House committee on agriculture chaired by Palawan Rep. Abraham Mitra showed that in 1997, Congress appropriated P14.5 billion for the program.

Former Speaker De Venecia said that a large part of the P145-billion for the agriculture-modernization program was misspent.

Some P12.9 billion was set aside in 1998, P11.6 billion in 1999, P16.6 billion in 2000, P11.4 billion in 2001, P14.4 billion in 2002, P12.1 billion in 2003, P9.4 billion in 2004, P10.3 billion in 2005, P11.5 billion in 2006, and P20.4 billion in 2007.

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As operational funds of the Department of Agriculture (DA), Congress appropriated a total of P43.8 billion over the same period.

De Venecia said with the expenditure of nearly P190 billion for agricultural modernization, the country should be self-sufficient in rice by now.

He said there is no compulsion on the part of the government to make the country self-sufficient in rice since rice importation is lucrative for corrupt officials involved in rice procurement and some personalities close to Malacañang.

“It is common knowledge in the industry that this group of people makes millions of dollars in commissions from rice imports,” he said.

He added that the same group is behind the rampant smuggling of rice in various ports throughout the country.

A large part of the P145 billion was supposed to have been spent for irrigation.

According to the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP), irrigation funds were released to administration allies in the House of Representatives and in local government units for election purposes.

Account for agri funds

The KMP has asked local government units (LGUs) nationwide to “come clean” and account if they received subsidy from the P3.1-billion irrigation fund for 2007.

The group expressed fear that the P48.7 billion in emergency budgetary support, loans and

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grants to the agriculture and fisheries sectors, which President Arroyo unveiled during the Food Summit in Clark, Pampanga, last week, could just end up like the still unaccounted for P728-million fertilizer fund and P5-billion swine fund.

The militant group believed that lack of transparency in the funds allotted for key agriculture programs, especially on the farming sector, including the P728-million fertilizer fund and P3.1 billion irrigation fund, has adversely affected rice yield in the country.

“This is a very real danger that we must guard against, while at the same time demanding justice and accountability for the funds that are already missing.

“We are warning Arroyo and her lackeys that we are watching them,” said Rafael Mariano, chairman of KMP and concurrent president of Anakpawis party-list.

Mariano claimed they have the list of recipients of the P3.1-billion irrigation fund for 2007, which include areas as far as Benguet, Surigao del Sur, and Basilan.

He also said that the irrigation funds were released in two tranches – the first was P500 million in January while the second was P2.6 billion in March of last year.

The KMP had previously urged Agriculture Secretary Arthur Yap and the National Irrigation Authority (NIA) to explain where the P3.1-billion irrigation fund went.

According to KMP, the DA and NIA now have at least P8.8-billion irrigation budget, but are still hard-put to explain where the funds went.

The group claimed that KMP chapters in many parts of the country have been reporting since June 2007 that there were no irrigation works or repairs done in their provinces.

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Reports received by the KMP even indicated that if there were some irrigation works that took place, it only involved “some initial diggings for a day” and then work would stop.

Devote funds to improvement

Meanwhile, a network of farmers and food security advocates yesterday urged the government to put in some P59 billion in the agriculture sector and make the country achieve rice self-sufficiency even by next year.

The Rice Watch and Action Network (R1) said the government should devote P59 billion to prop up repairs and construction of irrigation facilities in the country as well as establish post-harvest facilities and boost rural empowerment in order to ensure increase in rice yield.

R1 lead convener Jessica Reyes-Cantos lamented that the government’s spending for rice importation is now almost as much as the amount that should have been spent for irrigation and post-harvest facilities.

She said if only the government paid attention to the NFA, the nation could have attained increase in rice yield and could achieve self-sufficiency even by 2009.

Citing the computation of the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PRRI), the R1 noted that 109 percent self-sufficiency rate could be achieved in 2009 if the government will invest in P59-billion worth of irrigation, post-harvest facilities, and farm support to increase rice production.

But Cantos pointed out that the government is spending P58.7 billion for rice importation to avert a rice shortage for this period alone.

Farmers and civil society groups pressed the government to take a “bolder” move by immediately dropping its policy of dependence on importing rice to address the looming rice

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shortage in the country.

They are demanding that government shift funds used to import rice to enable massive development in local farming and drastically improve domestic production of the staple.

This way, the country would not become easily vulnerable to reported tightening of global food supply, they said.

Jimmy Tadeo, chairman of the National Rice Farmers Council (NRFC), said the country has around 1.5 million hectares of farmlands that should be irrigated.

However, he noted, irrigated farmlands in the country radically decreased to only around 800,000 hectares over years of government neglect of the farming sector, which evidently affected rice yield.

He said the massive conversion of agricultural lands into golf courses and subdivisions, as well as the rapid deterioration of soil quality of many farms due to immense use of chemical fertilizers contributed to lower rice production in the country.

“The farmers know the problem very well and they also know the solution,” Tadeo, who claims to be a farmer for 44 years now, said. “We have been telling the government what they should do, but they won’t listen.”

Tadeo maintained that the government should instead strengthen its agricultural programs by giving more support to local farmers through bigger input subsidies and post-harvest facilities like warehouses in every province and farm-to-market roads, among other significant infrastructures; and ensuring rural empowerment. – Katherine Adraneda # # #

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