

*Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Q. Pimentel, Jr. (PDP-Laban) today assailed the virtual suspension of the government's Land Acquisition and Distribution Program to the detriment of intended farmer-beneficiaries due to the failure of the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) to carry out its mandate under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law.*

Senator Pimentel said that although the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) expired on June 10, 2008, Republic Act 8532 provides funding for the implementation of the program for the entire year 2008.

He said the processing of landowners' claim folders for land that are ready for distribution is at a standstill. Field officials of DAR have reportedly stopped processing all LAD cases because landowners have threatened them with lawsuits.

"There is, however, nothing illegal about completing the CARP process until the end of the year. Still local DAR officials who should do their work are immobilized," Senator Pimentel said in a privilege speech at the Senate.

With the LAD program at a stand still, he asked Agrarian Reform Secretary Nasser Pangandaman how his department is spending the P1,233,510,600 (about P1.2 billion) that is intended for land acquisition and distribution this year.

The senator from Mindanao said that Secretary Pangandaman issued a memorandum last June 19 to all DAR officials enjoining them to continue the implementation of CARP.

The memorandum was issued to correct the misapprehension of DAR officials that the expiration of CARP on June 10 meant that they could no longer continue with the land acquisition and distribution aspect of CARP. The DAR secretary assured his subordinates that under RA 8532, the funds for said implementation are made available.

"Still no official in DAR, to our knowledge, responded positively to his memorandum. Even more unfortunate is that the Secretary left it at that," Senator Pimentel said.

Senator Pimentel said the state of inertia in which CARP is now in can be partly attributed by the apparent efforts of influential landowners to resist the coverage of their lands under CARP.

"Now, one reason why the land acquisition and distribution phase of the CARP is in limbo, I suggest is that political heavyweights are leaning on the DAR to go in the direction they point to," he said.

Senator Pimentel cited the inordinate delay in the government's acquisition of Hacienda Bacan

Written by Senator Pimentel's Press Office

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in Isabela, Negros Occidental which is owned by the family of First Gentleman Jose Miguel Arroyo.

He said the property was voluntarily offered for sale to CARP as early as June 11, 2001. After seven years, the claim folder of the hacienda was finally prepared. The claim folder is the file of documents that would justify the voluntary sale of the hacienda to the government and for its subsequent distribution to qualified agrarian reform beneficiaries.

However, Senator Pimentel said that while Hacienda Bacan was undergoing initial process of valuation, Ruy Alberto Rondain the lawyer of Rivulet Agro-Industrial Corporation which holds title to the property, wrote the Land Bank of the Philippines to stop the valuation.

Mr. Rondain cited as reason an alleged pending application for conversion of the hacienda into an agro-industrial use, mainly to produce ethanol.

Senator Pimentel said a check with at least three offices of DAR – the Bureau of Legal Assistance, the Center for Land Use Policy Planning and Implementation and DAR Region 6 – revealed that there was no pending application for conversion of the property.

The minority leader also mentioned the delay in the turnover of the landholding of former Congressman Herminio Reves in Negros Oriental to legitimate agrarian reform beneficiaries despite a Supreme Court ruling affirming coverage of the property under DAR.

Senator Pimentel said that while this is not just a case of the DAR people not wanting to do their job, it seems that “the fear of facing reprisals from powerful individuals has entered into their appraisal of what they should do under the circumstances.”

“But as we have already mentioned, there is nothing wrong with completing the CARP process until the end of 2008. One reason why the DAR people are not performing their tasks is that the feet of the agrarian reform secretary appear to be planted on the high grounds of power, not on the low level fields under CARP, which are his turf,” he said. # # #