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PRESS BRIEFING OF MS. DAPHNE OSEÑA-PAEZ
WITH DA UNDERSECRETARY ROGER NAVARRO AND ASSISTANT JOEY VILLARAMA
February 13, 2024 [11:57 A.M. - 12:26 P.M.]

MS. OSEÑA-PAEZ: Magandang tanghali ulit, Malacañang Press Corps, and welcome sa ating pagpapatuloy ng ating press briefing.

In the second part of today's sectoral meeting, President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. directed the Department of Agriculture to look for ways to manage the stability of supply and prices of basic commodities in view of the effects of the El Niño phenomenon which is expected to persist until May 2024.

Meanwhile, the DA assured the public that the supply of rice, corn, pork, and sugar among other daily necessities remains sufficient. Joining us this afternoon are Agriculture Undersecretary Roger Navarro and PCO Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama, who is the spokesperson for Task Force El Niño. Good afternoon.

DA USEC. NAVARRO: Good afternoon, good afternoon to everybody. Secretary Kiko Laurel just briefed the president that all our crops commodities especially for rice and corn, pork and chicken are very stable and there will be no problem in these coming months. So, we don't need to worry, just relax, sit back and watch the show.

MS. OSEÑA-PAEZ: Okay, can we have an update on the status of El Niño from Assistant Secretary Joey?

PCO ASEC. VILLARAMA: Yesterday, the Task Force El Niño had its second meeting at the Office of Civil Defense and, PAGASA in its advisory or bulletin number eight said that the effects of strong El Niño are expected to highly impact parts of the country this month of February. But as Miss Daphne mentioned, El Niño is expected to persist until May 2024. So, all the principal agencies involved in the task force, namely the Department of National Defense, Department of Agriculture, Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Department of Science and Technology, DILG, and even NEDA and Department of Energy have closely coordinated to implement mitigating measures to stave off the effects of El Niño.

MS. OSEÑA-PAEZ: Okay. Any question? Jean Mangaluz, Inquirer. Net.

JEAN MANGALUZ/INQ.NET: Hi, Usec. So you earlier said na we just sit back and relax. So most of the agricultural products really come from imports, can you share those percentages on how many are imported and which of the products are locally produced?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: Actually, for rice, for example, at least we need an importation volume of something like 330,000 metric tons per month with an average daily consumption of about 37 metric tons per day. And we have a production of rice form which is already about 13,000. So, we need a balance of 2.8 or 2.6 million that we need to import from other countries.

Normally, traditionally, we import like 3.8 million metric tons from other ASEAN countries. And as of date, we already imported from January to now, something like 590,000 metric tons, which is more than what we need for this month. So, with the coming production, comes March until April, May June we will have an ample supply of rice.

TUESDAY NIU/DZBB: Hi, sir. Usec, sabi nga ninyo, hindi tayo kailangang mag-aalala, sit back and relax, we have ample supply – rice corn or whatever. Pero, sir, maraming supply ang problema ay ang presyo. Mayroon na rin tayong mga in-import na in-expect natin ay iyon sana ang magbabalanse o magpapababa ng presyo ng bigas pero ngayon ay P59, mayroon akong nakikitang per kilo ng bigas. Papaano natin makakamit ang lower prices of rice?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: You know, the challenge now is not more on prices. As we feel in the industry, it is more on stabilizing the supply. Even if we have a small price or low price but if you do not have a supply, then we will have a problem. In other countries for example, in Vietnam, the price now is something like 48, and in Thailand is something like 52. So we are not far and they are supplying us with rice. So in other words, the challenge really is more on stabilizing supply rather than price. It's better to have rice at P56 rather than no rice at P42. So, we need to also rationalize our thinking that we cannot bring down the price because the input price especially for fertilizers and seeds in the international market is also going up to the ceiling. Unless we are going to buy P1 per bag of urea and then we can sell P10 per kilo of rice.

EDEN SANTOS/NET 25: Sir, good afternoon po. Kanina po nabanggit ng FDA iyong pag-ano ng ASF at saka ng Flu Vaccine para sa ating mga agri-industry. Mukhang hindi naman sila puwedeng mag-invite directly. Ang DA po ba, ano ang puwede nilang maging papel para naman po mayroong mga mag-apply po na mag-supply sa atin nitong mga vaccines na ito?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: Actually, that is the biggest challenge. Last few weeks, we were in Vietnam together with the president and we have talked to the different suppliers of ASF [Vaccine]. Unfortunately, in the country we have vaccines already but it is not being approved by FDA, that's the challenge of DA. And the backyard is somehow gone and we need to manage our ASF cases by way of really accessing the supply of vaccines. So that is really one of the challenges that we have right now.

EDEN SANTOS/NET 25: Sir, are you saying po na ang pangulo ay nakipag-usap sa Vietnam para magkaroon po tayo ng magsu-supply ng bakuna pero hindi inaprubahan ng FDA, am I right?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: Hindi po ang pangulo. We were just there together with the pangulo, but on the sides, we were talking to several suppliers not only for vaccines but also for rice –

so on the sides, because we were thinking, the secretary of agriculture was thinking that we need a supply of vaccines. Somehow, we need to talk to them because we know from experiments and from news and from the data from the other sources that Vietnam has successfully put up the vaccine for ASF. And right now, it's going to be commercialized and we in the Philippines would like to get the stocks or the vaccine supply from Vietnam.

EDEN SANTOS/NET 25: But the FDA told us kanina po, kailangan pong mag-submit ng application iyong mga bansa. May nag-submit na po ba?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: I am not privy to this because it should be FDA – that's the reason why we wanted, sana po magkaroon na lang kami ng sarili naming testing especially for agriculture na hindi na lang kasama ang FDA – but anyway, iyan talaga ang government process and mayroon nang nagdadala dito; nagsarili sila at nag-experiment sila at successful naman sila. But it is not commercialized.

KATRINA DOMINGO/ABS-CBN: Sir, can you please elaborate, because the FDA said, no one is applying for permit for the commercial use of ASF vaccines in the Philippines. Have your counterparts from Vietnam told you why they weren't really formally applying for these permits?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: I am not privy to this, I am sorry. I cannot speculate.

KATRINA DOMINGO/ABS-CBN: Sir, what about the local manufacturers that you were saying na nagsarili sila, na nag-experiment sila at success?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: These are not local; these are vaccines coming from other countries. They bought it for themselves. Unfortunately, we can say that they bought it on their own risk, and they experiment it and it was successful and we would like it to be approved. But we have processes in government that it should be accredited, tested, etc., approved by FDA. And we still would like FDA to have it approved for commercialization.

KATRINA DOMINGO/ABS-CBN: Opo. Sir, last follow-up on my end. Sir, what efforts are the DA actually doing to encourage these foreign manufacturers to formally apply for permits in the Philippines so that it can be sold commercially already?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: Right now, because of the talks that we have in Vietnam, we really encourage them to apply and we really encourage them to get in touch with the authorities so that we will be able to get their approvals. And the DA Secretary has already put forward the intention to help them in this regard. And I understand that there was a discussion this morning, and we hope that with the discussion this morning, it will fast track the approvals and the supply of ASF [vaccine] in the country.

MARICEL HALILI/TV5: Usec., just for clarification. Sir, ito pong kausap ninyo sa Vietnam na vaccine manufacturers, did they express interest in applying?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: Yeah, more than hundred percent.

MARICEL HALILI/TV5: And ano raw po iyong nangyari bakit up until now hindi pa rin sila nag-a-apply if that's the case?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: I'm sorry, ma'am, but I cannot speculate any answer for this. And I just hope that we will be able to—hope and pray that these companies from abroad will have themselves registered with the FDA so they can supply us.

MARICEL HALILI/TV5: And you mentioned earlier, sir, na kung puwede payagan na lang na kayo na lang iyong mag-test. What do you mean by that, sir?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: There are tedious processes in government, not only on vaccines but also on permits. For example, in agriculture supplies and agricultural products that goes through the FDA, and somehow issuance of LTO (License to Operate), you know, all of these things, ma'am, I'm sorry, these are government processes that we need also to respect and somehow ...

ALLAN FRANCISCO/PTV4: My question is for Asec. Villarama. Sir, you mentioned that high impact of El Niño will be experienced in other parts of the country this month, how are these provinces or places are preparing, ano po iyong efforts or assistance ng government, national government?

USEC. VILLARAMA: First of, a bit of good news. Kung doon sa initial or doon sa last report ng PAGASA, 50 provinces ang affected, ngayon ay na-reduce na lang to 41. So we have 17 provinces experiencing dry condition. Mayroon tayong ten provinces experiencing dry spell and then, 14 provinces experiencing drought.

So from the macro perspective, may ginagawa ang task force and the principal agencies. In terms of agriculture for example, there is an ongoing repair of irrigation canals para mas efficient ang pag-supply ng water. And then, mayroon ding inputs and implements for irrigation that are being given to farmers of the most affected areas which are Region IX and Region VI. So that's Western Visayas and Zamboanga Peninsula.

In terms of seeds, nagbibigay din po ang DA and there's social protection and alternative means of livelihood doon po sa nasalanta o naapektuhan talaga. So, as the president has emphasized, our approach to El Niño is, number one, intervention; number two, mitigation; and then we enjoined everyone – it's a whole-of-government approach. So maganda rin siguro sa may mga bureau sa probinsiya to go to the provinces and tap, maybe your regional correspondents to see what the regional offices of DA, of DSWD, of DENR are doing to help stave off the effects of El Niño.

ALAN FRANCISCO/PTV4: Sir, kung mayroon man, anong mga challenges?

USEC. VILLARAMA: Obviously, maraming challenges because we are fighting against nature. But as I said, medyo nagkaroon tayo ng relief because, obviously, there is still the amihan season so hindi pa kainitan iyong nai-experience natin ngayon. And then, as reported by the agencies in the task force meeting yesterday, water supply is still sufficient in Metro Manila and provinces; electricity supply is also sufficient; food supply, as Usec. said, is sufficient.

The challenge, of course, is to anticipate based on models what are the unforeseen effects – iyon iyong hindi natin mapo-foresee or makikita, iyon ang kailangan. So off the top of my head, paano po kung biglang, iyon nga, tumaas ang temperatura, bumaba ang dam water levels, may masirang irrigation inputs doon sa mga regions na affected.

So basically, the challenge is for the unforeseen events. But as I said, as the president mentioned in his speech in Davao last week, under Bagong Pilipinas, we try to nip the problem in the bud; not let them catch us off-guard.

JEAN MANGALUZ/INQUIRER.NET: Hi, sir. Can I just go back to a topic earlier? So, Usec., you said na the priority is stabilizing the supply of rice over the prices. So what happened to the supply if only a few could afford rice because the prices are so high? Can we expect it to naturally go down?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: No. Actually, it was suggested in the meeting that we have the 4Ps, for example, for DSWD. We told the president that if we can convert the 4Ps – instead of money, it should be in rice form supplied by NFA, so we will take them out in the price pressures of the market in terms of buying high-price rice. These are 20% all over the country which are the vulnerable poor under the DSWD that is beneficiary for 4Ps, and we're giving them money, and unfortunately because that is not rice, they're going to buy rice in the market price; and that put pressure and inflationary in the market because they're going to compete with the people who have money and then with only 4Ps. If we can convert the 4Ps by way of supplying them rice instead of money through NFA, then probably the inflation on rice will go down.

JEAN MANGALUZ/INQUIRER.NET: Sir, follow-up. How did the president react to this suggestion?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: The president is saying that we will consider the proposal and they will take a look on how to implement this proposal.

SAM MEDENILLA: Good afternoon. Itatanong lang po namin kung magkano na po ba iyong estimated damage ng El Niño sa agriculture as of now? At saka if this is within the target of DA?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: Sa ngayon, wala pa namang damage.

USEC. VILLARAMA: There is a reported figure of 150 million, I think. That's basically, again, as I said, from Regions IX and VI. So the bulk of that damage is in rice and corn. But as Usec said, hindi pa naman siya ganoon kalaki. So just to break it down, for rice, it's 141.24 million; and then for corn, that's 10.04 million. So two regions pa lang po ang severely affected, but as I said, the task force is doing all it can to help the farmers affected by the situation.

Q: Earlier, na-mention po na ang pinaka-peak raw po ng El Niño is mga February or March, so parang ito na po ba iyong worst na damage or pababa na o puwede pa po itong tumaas eventually?

PCO ASEC. VILLARAMA: Strong El Niño is expected to persist until this month and then hopefully, by March, April and May, magpi-persist pa rin siya, but I am not sure because this is very technical, I'm not sure if we will still categorize it as strong El Niño. And then by June, iyon na po iyong tinatawag na southern oscillation, neutral, which is neither El Niño or La Niña. But in terms of the work of the task force and the government, we are forward looking to mitigate the effects until maybe June to September. So, hindi porke ma-terminate iyong strong El Niño or maging southern oscillation, neutral na siya ay titigil na po ang trabaho ng task force to help those severely affected.

Q: Sir, on another matter, magtatanong lang po kami, earlier na-mention din po ng FDA iyong may JAO raw po na isa-sign regarding doon sa veterinary vaccine for Avian Flu and ASF. Ano po ba iyong gist noong JAO na pipirmahan ng FDA at saka DA?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: Wala pa kaming idea po, pare-pareho lang tayo.

MS. OSEÑA-PAEZ: It's another division. Okay, Alvin Baltazar/Radyo Pilipinas.

ALVIN BALTAZAR/RADYO PILIPINAS: Usec. Joey Villarama. Good afternoon. Sir, kanina sa sectoral meeting with the president. Mayroon bang bagong directive ang pangulo tungkol doon sa paghahanda natin sa El Niño and nai-present ba kay Pangulo kung ilan most probably iyong mga magsasakang maapektuhan nitong tagtuyot?

PCO ASEC. VILLARAMA: In terms of number of farmers to be affected, I don't have an exact figure. But the meeting, the cluster meeting today was not specifically about El Niño but yesterday as I mentioned, the second meeting of the El Niño Task Force presided over by secretary of National Defense, Sec. Teodoro and the co-chair is DOST Secretary Solidum. So, there were presentations about the deliverables and the interventions that will be made by each principal sector. So, we do not, personally, I have to check my notes. I do not have a specific number in terms of the individual farmers that will be affected. But again, rest assured that this is constantly being monitored and that whatever the number will be, whatever the number is, the task force and the government will help these affected farmers and individuals.

Q: Follow-up lang kay Usec. Navarro. Kung pag-uusapan natin iyong buffer stock ng food natin, mukhang mahahagip kasi ng El Niño iyong hanggang April, okay ba iyong buffer stock ng pagkain natin to feed the Filipinos?

DA USEC. NAVARRO: Yeah, actually ang buffer kasi ngayon, kino-consider na natin after RTL is a private sector concern. Mayroon tayong buffer for NFA na kaunti at ang malaking food security na ginagawa natin is in the concerns or in the responsibility ng rice importers, that is the reason why na mayroon tayong RTL. Iyong RTL kasi, ini-open natin iyon, kasi sinasabi natin na for so long a time, napakalaki ng importations. So iyong importation na iyon, i-open na iyon. So nandoon iyong supply sa ating mga importers.

Ang challenge naman din, siyempre ang ating NFA is buying buffer through local production. Kulang nga lang siya ng ating modernization, iyong dryer, silo, and all of these things which the president has recently approved during the last cabinet meeting natin last month yata on the P93 billion project for post-harvest facility. So, iyon iyong challenge natin.

But as I said a while ago that the importation of rice supposedly to hurdle something like 300 plus per month, as of today, it's already almost 600. In other words, hindi pa tayo, bukas pa kasi iyong Valentines, di ba. So, umabot na tayo ng almost 600, 'di ba. So, in other words we will be more comfortable with the consumptions. So, huwag kayong mag-aalala, kung sino iyong mga mahal ninyo sa buhay, mayroon pa rin siyang bigas, regaluhan ng bigas.

CRESILYN CATARONG/SMNI: Good afternoon po. Puwede pong makahingi ng details po, sir, regarding po doon sa pag-suspend po ng Minimum Access Volume sa pork and corn po?

PCO ASEC. VILLARAMA: Okay, hindi kasama sa meeting iyan kanina. Pero anyway, I will just give you some insights. MAV kasi ay rules 'di ba, kasi mayroon tayong mga agreements with other country, bilaterals and ang MAV kasi ay may volume iyan, mga commitment para sa other countries and us. Siguro binabase lang natin ito doon sa ating tinatawag na executive order or Administrative Order 10 na binawasan natin iyong ating taripa for rice, corn, poultry and pork. And it has been there for about three years, and nag-aalboroto iyong ating local producer.

Kaya sinasabi natin sa DA, it will be remiss on us coming from the private sector, we are not from DA, we are from private sector together with the secretary that we will not show our concern to the local producers. To support the local producers, we would like to show our concern by saying that we should give them a reprieve and these issues now is just put in the table for discussion.

Kasi alam naman natin na ang MAV kasi ay ginagamit ito for technical smuggling, so we need to stop technical smuggling. And ito iyong tinitingnan namin na one way to stop or eliminate technical smuggling is going away with MAV. Pero siyempre may mga sector na mag-alboroto din, 'di ba. Pero sinasabi namin, siguro i-rationalize natin iyong MAV kung sino iyong processor

siya iyong may karapatang mag-import ng MAV; kung sino iyong mga traders, eh medyo dahan-dahanin natin.

Kasi ang nangyari, ang napakaraming volume na nakukuha ng MAV, iyong mga traders at nangyayari iyong mga meat products nila nandoon sa ating wet market na nagko-compete sila doon sa ating mga local producers. For us to show our concern, our support to the local farmers and local producers, it would be remiss if we are not going to do this. But this is a plan, hindi pa ito final, because it has to be discussed in the economic clusters. So that's it. Thank you.

MS. OSEÑA-PAEZ: Thank you very much. This concludes our briefing today with the Department of Agriculture and Task Force El Niño. Magandang hapon sa inyong lahat. Thank you, Malacañang Press Corps.

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