

DATE

5 JAN 2016

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Tuesday

DENR

IN THE NEWS

SINCE 1900

MANILA BULLETIN

THE NATION'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

PAGE

UPPER HALF

LOWER HALF

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICES

Ban on mineral exports will take time – DENR

By MARS W. MOSQUEDA JR.

CEBU CITY – The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said that even if the House of Representatives and Senate bills promoting the development of mineral processing and banning the export of minerals will be approved now, it will take at least five years of transition period before it is implemented.

DENR Secretary Ramon Paje made the statement in response to the query of lawyer Laiza Kristel Gingoyon of the Angel Law Office at Cebu Business Park, whose mineral-exporter clients will be affected by House Bill 5058

authored by Rep. Francisco Matugas and Senate Bill 2374 sponsored by Sen. Bam Aquino.

“Assuming HB 5058 and SB 2374 will be enacted into law, the government will surely allow an adequate transition period of about five years before the ban on mineral export and mandatory processing of mineral ores will be implemented,” Paje said in his letter to Gingoyon.

Gingoyon, in her letter to Paje, also expressed fears that thousands of Filipino workers will be jobless if the ban on export of mineral products will be implemented.

“While we are supporting the bill,

it is important to make sure that the industry and its stakeholders are ready for the law's implementation,” Paje said.

Towards this end, Paje said they need to improve the government support system for the industry and to provide for incentive schemes to make the industry competitive.

“The inadequacy of our power supply is also a serious concern and this should be decisively addressed first before we allow new smelting plants to operate,” Paje added.

House Committee on Natural Resources Secretary Raul G. Terso earlier informed Matugas that the passage of

his bill entitled “An act promoting the development of mineral processing and in the process banning the export of iron, nickel, chromite, manganese, and other strategic metallic ores” is very nil due to lack of time.

Terso informed Matugas that his bill is still being considered in the Technical Working Group (TWG) created for the purpose of further study.

“Considering that the bill is deemed a component of other major bills being considered by the Committee, ample time is necessary to be able for the TWG to integrate mineral processing in the main agenda of the government for the mining sector,” Terso said.

5 JAN 2016

Abante

UNA SA BALITA

DATE

3

PAGE

UPPER HALF

LOWER HALF

PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE NEWS CLIPPINGS

NE mayor umapela sa DENR

BONGABON, Nueva Ecija — “Pansinin n’yo naman kami!”

Ito ang madamdaming panawagan ni Mayor Allan Gamilla sa mga taga-Environmental Management Bureau (EMB) ng Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) upang tingnan ang kalunus-lunos na kalagayan ng naturang bayan pagkaraan ng tatlong matitinding bagyo noong nakaraang taon.

Ayon kay Gamilla, makaraang tumama ang bagyong Kabayan noong unang bahagi ng Oktubre ng nagdaang taon, nawasak na ang kanilang dike mula Brgy. Pesa hanggang Brgy. Tugatog at lumiham na siya sa EMB para siyasatin ang pangyayari.

Muli ay lumiham si Gamilla sa EMB upang makita ang kalagayan ng bayan at mairekomenda ang mga nararapat na hakbangin para maipatigil ang mga ginawang quarrying o maging pagmimina sa katabing bundok ng bayan. (Jojo de Guzman)

5 JAN 2016

INQUIRER

PAGE

B-4

LOWER HALF

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE



HOLCIM PH PLANTS RECOGNIZED IN MINES SAFETY AND ENVIRONMENT MEET

Construction solutions company Holcim Philippines, Inc. bagged eight awards including the Best Mining Forest award for its Misamis Oriental operations in the 62nd Annual National Mine Safety and Environment Conference last Nov. 21, 2015 in Baguio City. The company's quarries in La Union and Davao were also the second and third runners-up, respectively, for Best Mining Forest-Non Metallic Category. It was the fourth straight year Holcim Philippines's quarry in Misamis Oriental received the Best Mining Forest award and the ninth time in the last 10 years. In photo, Holcim Philippines president and country CEO Eduardo Sahagun (second from left) and senior vice president for Manufacturing Andre Caluori receive the Best Mining Forest Award for the company's plant in Lugait, Misamis Oriental from Mines and Geosciences Bureau director Leo Jasareno (leftmost) and Philippine Mining Safety and Environment Association president Louie Sarmiento (rightmost).

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Gov't wins case vs top Marcos crony

By Marlon Ramos

THE SANDIGANBAYAN has ordered the heirs of a Marcos crony to turn over to the government some P511 million worth of properties that he and his family had acquired through the unlawful logging concessions covering 534,000 hectares of forest lands in four provinces, an area equivalent to

9,207 Rizal Parks.

The antigraft court's special second division issued the ruling more than 24 years after the Philippine Commission on Good Government (PCGG) brought a civil suit against the late Alfonso Lim Sr., his son Alfonso Jr. and former Minister of Natural Resources Teodoro Peña in October 1991.

GOV'T WINS/A4

From page A1

The late strongman Ferdinand Marcos, his wife Imelda Marcos and their family were also impleaded in the case, but the court did not mention any liability on their part.

In a decision promulgated on Dec. 14, 2015, the court noted that then Minister of Natural Resources Ernesto Maceda had voided on Nov. 20, 1986 the timber license agreements (TLA) given to seven companies owned by Lim and his family.

Constitutional limit

As correctly concluded by Maceda, the Sandiganbayan said the timber concessions granted to Lim exceeded the constitutional limit of 100,000 hectares.

The antigraft court said Lim and his family owned Taggat Industries Inc., Pamplona Redwood Veneer Inc., Southern Plywood Corp., Western Cagayan Lumber Co. Inc., Acme Plywood & Veneer Co. Inc., Veterans Woodworks Inc. and Sierra Madre Woods Ind. Inc.

Narra, almaciga trees

The companies used to cut and export narra and almaciga trees in the 1970s in the forest of Batangas, Cagayan, Rizal and Cavite provinces.

"[T]he estate of Alfonso D.



CONJUGAL DICTATORSHIP Former President Ferdinand Marcos and former first lady Imelda

INQUIRER PHOTO

Lim... [is] directed to return and reconvey to the [government] all funds and properties acquired through the canceled TLAs...," the court said.

"[T]his court finds that the Republic has sufficiently proven that defendant Alfonso Lim Sr. had indeed acquired timber license agreements far in excess of that allowed by the 1973 Constitution," it added.

"It is only inevitable that the action for reconveyance and reversion be granted."

The ruling was penned by Associate Justice Napoleon Inoturan and was concurred in by Associate Justices Teresita Diaz-Bal-

dos, chair of the special second division, and Oscar Herrera Jr.

The Sandiganbayan, however, dismissed the claim for damages filed by the PCGG against the Lims and absolved Peña of any complicity in the illegal grant of logging permits to Lim's companies.

So influential

"As regards defendant Peña, this court finds the evidence adduced by the [government] lacking to prove his participation in the timber concessions granted [to Lim and his companies]," the court said.

It said even the Supreme

Court had ruled that Lim was "so influential that he and his companies received timber related benefits without the knowledge, let alone approval of the Minister of Natural Resources."

The court said records also showed that it was actually then Minister of Natural Resources Jose Leido Jr. who approved the logging permits given to one of Lim's companies in February 1979.

Return properties, planes

Among the properties that should be returned to the government were the parcels of land worth P206.6 million in Tagaytay City and real estate properties in Rizal and Batangas valued at P171 million, according to the court.

It said the PCGG Asset Management Department also found that one of Lim's firms was the registered owner of two Cessna planes, but the aircraft were "nowhere to be found."

Some of Lim's properties were still subject of other pending litigation while the others were mortgaged in private banks and occupied by informal settlers, the court said.

Other assets and bank accounts of Lim and his companies had either been sold in public auctions or had already been closed.

5 JAN 2016

DATE

B-2

PAGE

UPPER HALF

LOWER HALF

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

In an uncertain financial environment, diversify

By Doris Dumlao-Abadilla

Last of two parts

AS THE national elections draw near, campaigning is expected to intensify and political spending is seen rising substantially, providing an added boost to business and the economy.

The figures cited by Pulse Asia—that 20-22 percent of voters are in the Visayas and 24-28 percent are in Mindanao—the areas where Vice President Jejomar Binay had shown leadership in the survey, could mean campaign strategy, as well as political spending, will focus on these areas, Jose Mari Lacson, head of research at Campos Lanuza & Co., said.

"If this is accurate, we could see these areas benefiting more from political spending. Among the retailers, Metro Retail Stores may benefit the most from consumption demand spike driven by election spending in its core market," Lacson said.

All in all, Lacson said investors should be patient and let valuations come to them instead of going after share price rallies.

Top picks

"Although capital gains will be scarce in 2016, the PSEi can still perform well by mounting up on domestic consumption-related stocks, whose valuations stand on firmer ground and will not easily recede with the retreating tide of capital," Lacson said.

"We also like infrastructure and power-related companies that have invested in projects and capacity back in 2013 because the timing of returns and revenues will be perfect in 2016-2017, when these are completed. Barring a collapse in transportation and power demand, this should reflect a strong kick in earnings," he said.

For Citigroup stocks analyst Minda

Olonan, the strategy should be selective stock picking, focusing on stocks that were trading well below mean valuations like Ayala Land, Metropolitan Bank and Trust Co. and Puregold Price Club., alongside relatively "defensive" plays like SM Prime, Banco de Oro and Universal Robina Corp.

Risks, challenges

Banco De Oro Unibank chief strategist Jonathan Ravelas said that despite his bank's cautiously optimistic economic outlook for 2016, investors should be cognizant of several risks and challenges that could temper positive expectations.

"On the external front, geopolitical tensions in the Middle East could sharpen volatility in the prices of crude oil in the world market. Prolonged uncertainties could impact the ability of the country to deploy more overseas Filipino workforce in the region as higher fiscal deficits slow down construction activities in the region," Ravelas said.

The Middle East accounts for more than 70 percent of the country's overseas labor force and remittances.

Ravelas also noted that China's slowdown would gnaw on the country's trade performance with China, now accounting for 20 percent of total trade.

On the domestic side, he said the impact of the El Niño dry spell would put pressure on local inflation and interest rates.

Diversification

"While our base case scenario is cautiously optimistic, investors should always structure their portfolio against a worst-case event or what others would call the 'Black Swan' event. The prudent way of managing one's portfolio is to always remain diversified in the different asset classes and in cur-

rencies," Ravelas said.

He said investors could look at diversifying his local investments given interesting opportunities outside of the Philippines.

"Investments in fixed income securities could be a mix of cash instruments for liquidity needs, investment grade bonds both sovereign and corporates, and a few non-investment grade fixed income securities to enhance yield of the portfolio," Ravelas said.

"Also, having a mix of short-term to medium-term duration/maturity of fixed income investments provides opportunities for investors to re-invest maturing bond investments in a gradually rising interest rate environment or lock in their investment if rates stay persistently low in the next three to five years," he said.

An investor can also add stocks to his/her portfolio to protect it from unexpected rise in inflation, Ravelas said. Based on several studies, Ravelas noted that stocks—while more volatile than bonds—could provide higher returns than bonds over the long-run.

"Therefore, having an exposure of stocks (whether direct securities or combination of mutual funds) ranging from 10-20 percent puts the overall portfolio in a position to take advantage of the base case scenario and as well as protect the portfolio in a worst-case event," he said.

"Lastly, adding more asset classes in the form of alternative investments such as commodities, real estate investment trusts, enhances the investor's portfolio by reducing the volatility of the investments but at the same time enhancing the overall yield of the portfolio. The key to navigating one's investment portfolio in a volatile and uncertain financial environment is simply to diversify, diversify and diversify."

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Baguio LGU to focus on garbage, traffic woes

By **ZALDY C. COMANDA**

BAGUIO CITY — The city's garbage disposal problems and traffic jams will be prioritized by the local government as January signals the onset of the peak tourism months for the city.

Mayor Mauricio Domogan said his administration and other government agencies were able to gain headway in addressing these major concerns last year, but will give it a final push to once and for all solve the problems.

Domogan said the city would put up an integrated solid waste management facility at Sto. Tomas School within the 130-hectare city-owned property as the ultimate solution to address the city's solid waste disposal problem and save P100 million annually for the hauling of waste from the city to the Capas-engineered sanitary landfill.

The integrated solid waste disposal facility will be composed of a waste-to-energy plant, anaerobic digester, the two Environmental Recycling System (ERS) machines, an engineered sanitary landfill and a treatment facility for hospital waste.

In terms of tourism, the mayor said Baguio remains as a preferred destination in the country as evidenced by the influx of visitors year-round, making tourism-related businesses lucrative for local residents.

The Baguio City Police Office is known for setting up traffic schemes when the city expects big volume traffic, while Domogan has a Technical Working Group working on the terms of reference for the putting up of a multi-level parking building within the Ganza property.

The parking building, along with the use of parks and football fields as parking spaces, is expected to help decongest the city roads from too much vehicular traffic.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Baguio needs P300 million for access road to waste facility

By Dexter A. See

BAGUIO CITY—The city government needs at least P300 million to build the required access road from Barangay Camp 7 leading to the portion of the 30-hectare city-owned property in Sto. Tomas school area previously identified as the proposed site for the multi-functional integrated solid waste disposal facility.

The facility is expected to solve the existing waste problem of the city and reduce the expenses currently incurred in hauling the city's residual waste to the engineered sanitary landfill in Capas, Tarlac.

Mayor Mauricio G. Domogan said the local government will have to heavily invest on

the infrastructure component that will facilitate the establishment of the solid waste disposal facility.

"We have to be decisive on the matter. A facility within the city will allow the city government to have full control operations. This will translate to improved disposal of the city's waste," said Domogan.

Based on the latest Waste Analysis and Characterization Study conducted by the National Solid Waste Management Commission, a total of 502 tons of assorted waste is generated daily by the city. Of this, 160 tons are hauled out of the city into the Capas landfill. The city spends P70 million to P100 million annually for this.

Under the proposed integrat-

ed solid waste disposal facility, the city plans to put up a temporary engineered sanitary landfill to be used to accommodate the waste generated by the city.

A waste-to-energy facility would be built, coupled with the inclusion of the operation of the two multi-million Environmental Recycling System machines, an anaerobic digester and the technology that will treat hazardous hospital and medical waste, all in one area.

According to him, only 2 hectares out of the 50 hectares initially identified by the city's technical team as the site of the facility will actually be used to accommodate all the integrated solid waste disposal equipment considering that their operations complement each other.



PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE NEWS CLIPPINGS

5 JAN 2016

DATE

3

PAGE

UPPER-HALF

LOWER-HALF

Basura dapat iproseso kung saan ito nagmula

TAPOS na ang selebrasyon ng Bagong Taon pero hindi pa rin nalilinis ang paligid ng buong Metro Manila.

Saan kaya dadalhin ang mga gabundok ng basurang ito?

Hanggang ngayon, walang malinaw na solusyon ang gobyerno sa waste disposal management gayong inihiwalay na ang mga nabubulok sa hindi nabubulok.

Ang mga nabubulok na basura ay pwedeng gawing organic fertilizers at ang mga hindi nabubulok ay paghihiwalayin sa mga nare-recycle at mga hindi nare-recycle at may toxins.

Sa totoo lang, ang waste segregation scheme ay ningas-cogon lamang dahil ang basura ay pinagkikitaan din ng ilang ehekutibo ng gobyerno.

Dapat ay ipatupad ang waste disposal scheme sa mismong mga

'bahay' pa lamang at isagawa ito nang araw-araw sa 'barangay level' upang maiayos ito nang mabuti.

Imbes na ipakontra ang mga basura sa 'trucking service', dapat ay ipakontra ito sa 'waste recycle' firms kung saan isasagawa ang proseso sa barangay level.

Meaning, ang biyahe o pagtatapunan ng basura ay biglang maresolba dahil hindi ito ibibiyahe nang malayo, bagkus ay ipo-

proseso ito kung saan ito 'nagmula.'

Ang mga barangay na kakaunti ang basura ay magkakaroon ng malinis na kapaligiran at ang barangay na maraming basura ay maaaring pagtayan ng 'produksiyon ng organic fertilizers'.

Dapat ding higpitan ang mga pabrika at kompanya na walang maayos na waste disposal system.

EDITORIAL

The Manila Times

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Biodegradable fruit bag developed

THE Department of Agriculture's Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (PhilMech) is conducting tests on a transparent biodegradable bag for use in farms to help reduce the amount of plastic waste which is harmful to the environment.

"What farmers and agriculture commodity traders use today are still plastics and those that are left undisposed after use can present problems to the environment," Rex Bingabing, executive director of PhilMech, said in a statement.

Plastic bags and products take years to degrade and can impede plant growth if left to rot in soil.

Fruit farms also use plastic bags to protect fruits under development from pests and the outside elements, while plastic film is used for mulching in farming, which helps reduce moisture loss from the soil.

Collaborating with the National Mango Research and Development Center in Jordan, Guimaras and a private plastic firm, PhilMech is currently testing a biodegradable

bag made from cassava starch and polybutylene succinate (PBS).

The PBS and starch were melt-blended in a twin-screw extruder and then blown into a film extrusion machine.

PhilMech first developed a transparent biodegradable fruit bag for testing. The biodegradable fruit bag measures 6 x 8 inches with a thickness of 150 microns. The tensile strength is within the range of low-density polyethylene (LDPE) while the elongation is within the range of high-density polyethylene (HDPE). However, the biodegradable bag has higher density and absorbs more water.

PhilMech projects that the biodegradable fruit bag would completely degrade after 36 weeks.

When the biodegradable bag was tested as packaging on fruits, the quality of harvested fruits in terms of percent marketable, non-marketable and export, peel color at ripe stage, flesh color and percent edible portion were comparable with the existing bagging materials such as a Chinese brown

paper bag and old newspaper.

The development of a biodegradable bag was done under the project "Utilization of Biodegradable Composites Material on the Production of Fruit Bag" by PhilMech researchers Andres Tuates Jr. and Ofero Caparino, PhD.

"Plastics have achieved a dominant position in agriculture because of their transparency, lightness in weight, impermeability to water and their resistance to microbial attack. It is used as food and fruit packaging, fruit bag, food container, seedling bag, mulching film, protective for greenhouse, dryer shed and among others. However, this generates higher quantity of wastes that are difficult to dispose by the user farmers," the researchers said.

"The plastic residues remain on the soil for some years as large pieces and they are an impediment to plant growth and also a potential hazard to animals if the land is subsequently put down to grass," they added.

JAMES KONSTANTIN GALVEZ

The Manila Times

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Pamalakaya vows to stop Laguna Lake dike project

BY NEIL A. ALCOBER REPORTER

THE fisher folk alliance *Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas (Pamalakaya)* on Monday vowed to intensify efforts to oppose the construction of a road dike around the Laguna Lake.

The fishers' group said the P122.8 billion Laguna Lakeshore Expressway Dike Project (LLEDP) is not a sign of development but a destructive project that will ruin the productive waters of Laguna de Bay.

The Laguna Lake Development Authority (LLDA) plans to build a road dike around the 90-hectare Laguna de Bay, involving massive reclamation for the

construction project.

LLEDP, one of President Benigno Aquino 3rd's biggest Public-Private Partnership (PPP) projects, has two components – construction of a 47-kilometer expressway road dike from Los Banos, Laguna to Muntinlupa, Taguig, and reclamation of 700 hectares for commercial and mixed-use development.

Pamalakaya had proposed that

the budget allocated to the project should instead be spent on the improvement and restoration of the natural wealth of the 90,000 hectare lake.

"This 2016, the fisher folks will face one of their worst nightmares that will kill their sector. The monstrous LLEDP will soon begin, and millions of fisher folks and urban poor families around Laguna de Bay will be displaced from their communities and livelihoods.

"The LLEDP will also bring total death to the lake and millions of Filipinos directly and indirectly dependent on its waters will also be affected," Salvador France, the group's vice-chairperson, said in a statement.

The group said about 3.9 million fishermen and urban poor

families in Los Banos, Laguna, Muntinlupa and Taguig will be affected once the project starts. About 40 percent of fish supply in Metro Manila comes from Laguna de Bay.

"The LLEDP is not a development but a destructive project meant to kill the productive waters of Laguna de Bay to pave the way to commercial projects that will benefit only the business tycoons like those of Sy, Ayala, Aboitiz and other influential conglomerates interested in the project," France said.

The deadline for bidding for the project has been moved several times due to the project's complexities and concerns expressed by interested bidders.

5 JAN 2016

DATE

Page 1 Story

PAGE

UPPER HALF

LOWER HALF

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Whale shark found dead in Surigao del Norte



Residents gather near a 24-foot *butanding* or whale shark, which was found dead on the shore of Barangay Pamosaingan in Socorro, Surigao del Norte last Jan. 1. Story on Page 4.

A 24-foot whale shark was found dead along the seashore in Barangay Pamosaingan in Socorro town, Surigao del

Norte on New Year's Day, local officials said.

Locally known as *butanding*, the whale shark got en-

tangled in a fishnet off the coast of Pamosaingan.

Barangay captain Felipa Liquido said the whale shark

was already dead when the owners of the fishnet, Pacquito Tatoy and his wife, saw it lying on the beach.

The couple then sought the help of fishermen to drag the whale shark ashore.

The provincial government

sent a team to bury the whale shark. It was buried yesterday in Socorro town.

— Ben Serrano

Napocor to release water from Angat Dam today

In anticipation of the monsoon rains, the National Power Corp. (Napocor) will discharge water from Angat Dam, Metro Manila's main source of potable water, today.

Napocor said it would release a minimal amount of water from the dam at 8 a.m.

The power firm said

the release was due to the advisory of the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) regarding the combination of monsoon and easterly rains.

The Angat Dam will open Gate 2 and discharge an estimated 70 cubic meters per

By **DANESSA RIVERA**

second of water.

Napocor said the water would hardly affect the Angat River and would not cause flooding in nearby areas.

"As of 3 p.m. yesterday, Angat's water level was 215.11 meters, which is above the normal high level of 212

meters," Napocor said.

It advised the public to be on alert and take necessary precautions.

Before the holidays, Napocor was criticized for releasing water from Angat Dam from Dec. 17 to 23.

Bulacan Gov. Wilhelmino Sy-Alvarado earlier threatened to file charges

against Napocor, the National Water Resources Board, National Irrigation Authority and Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System for aggravating the flooding in several towns.

Napocor and the water agencies said they were ready to answer any issue on the Angat Dam spill.

5 JAN 2016

DATE

A-8

PAGE

UPPER HALF

LOWER HALF

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Ban firecrackers

IN THE days leading up to the New Year celebrations, the spokesman of the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), Supt. Renato Marcial, made the rounds of TV and radio talk shows to press home the BFP's proposal for a total ban on firecracker use by civilians on Christmas and New Year's Eve. If that sounds like a radical, excessive solution

EDITORIAL

to what many may feel is just harmless, once-a-year revelry, one need only look at the grim numbers to be disabused of the idea that firecrackers are not all that bad.

The Department of Health's latest bulletin says injuries relating to firecracker use, most of them occurring during the New Year countdown and the parties afterwards, have hit 760. Most of the cases involved persons less than 14 years old; the first day of the new year alone saw nine children getting their fingers amputated due to severe injuries. As of Sunday, the Philippine National Police reported 51 incidents of stray bullet injuries from the indiscriminate firing of guns, causing injuries to 41 people, including two deaths.

There's some bit of good news in these figures. According to the DOH—so far, the total number of such incidents is 57 percent lower than the five-year average for the same period in 2010-2014. There have been zero cases of firecracker ingestion, and only two fatalities recorded, one of them the widely reported case of a drunken man who embraced a giant lit firecracker called "Goodbye Philippines."

Apparently, the yearly information campaign launched by the DOH, PNP and BFP warning the public about the dangers of dabbling in firecrackers is taking effect, if ever so slowly. Still, what the DOH and BFP are publicly battling for is a step above prevention—a total firecracker ban to eliminate the hundreds of injuries clogging the hospitals at this time of year, most of them involving hapless minors who have to live with the painful, irreversible lesson of mangled limbs for the rest of their lives.

Their proposal makes a lot of sense: Ban the use of firecrackers by private individuals, households and civilians, and let trained personnel instead handle such lethal materials in especially designated firecracker zones where people can enjoy the spectacle of fireworks safely, without having to put their lives on the line for the vicarious thrill of exploding lights and sounds.

Allowing firecracker use in a limited, strictly monitored setting—the way other countries are doing it—addresses, first of all, the fears of a sizeable constituency of people whose livelihoods depend on the production of fireworks and sparklers; their industry would not be wiped out, but they have, of course, to hew to the law that prohibits the sale and manufacture of, say, the "piccolo," a "small but terrible monster"—as the environmental watchdog EcoWaste Coalition has called it—that remains the No. 1 cause of injuries among those foolhardy enough to play with firecrackers.

Restricting firecracker use to a designated area would also help contain the terrible, acrid rubbish that litters the streets once the communal revelry is done. (What's with Filipinos whooping it up but not taking the responsibility to clean up their trash afterwards, as in the firecracker debris left on streets and the vast garbage that despoiled Rizal Park a day after New Year?)

Davao has shown that a total firecracker ban can work—and you have to give it to Mayor Rodrigo Duterte on this. Muntinlupa City has followed suit, which means that with enough political will, a destructive cultural tradition can be tamed and subsumed in the general welfare.

The DOH-BFP proposal deserves wide support for the savings it can generate the government, which need no longer engage in massive public awareness and information campaigns, year after year, about the dangers of firecracker use, once these lethal products are summarily outlawed.

So why does Malacañang appear uninterested at this time to push for such a ban? It has washed its hands of the issue, saying it's up to Congress and the local government units to impose a total ban on firecrackers. What a cop-out. Obviously, Congress and the LGUs would need to be pushed, pestered and prodded big-time before they would consider spending time threshing out the fine points of this issue. Banning firecrackers may not be a politically sexy argument for politicians concerned only with being popular—but it is, for all intents and purposes, an urgent matter of public health and safety. It deserves to make noise, at the very least.