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DENR

IN THE NEWS

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Military helicopter dumps water over burning Apo

By Eldie Aguirre, Orlando Dinoy and Allan Nawal
Inquirer Mindanao

DIGOS CITY—A military helicopter flew over a fire raging on grassy fields on Mount Apo on Tuesday, dumping 600 liters of water to prevent it from spreading toward Sta. Cruz town in Davao del Sur province.

On the ground, volunteers trekked closer to the scene for clearing operations to build a containment zone.

So far, the fire has razed some 300 hectares of grasslands and forested areas in Apo, the country's highest peak, since Black Saturday, said Eduardo Ragaza, national park supervisor of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources in Southern Mindanao.

"We conducted an aerial viewing on Monday and we saw that the grasses on the entire peak of the mountain had been razed. There are no more grasslands there, but the closed canopy forest cover has not been reached by the fire yet," Ragaza told the INQUIRER on the phone.

The helicopter, which was sent by the Philippine Air Force from Cebu, tossed over the burning grassland a bucket carrying up to 600 liters of water that it scooped from a lake in Barangay Kapatagan here, said Harry Camorro, officer of the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office.

"It has some effect and we are not losing hope," he said, adding that the fire was moving toward Sta. Cruz.

After dumping water 11 times over the fire, the helicopter halted its flights on Tuesday afternoon due to a thick fog

that hindered visibility.

More sorties will be conducted once the weather improves, said Edgardo Elera, city tourism officer.

Elera also said volunteers had trekked closer to the fire zone to conduct clearing operations to prevent the fire from further spreading.

Asked how fast the fire was moving, Ragaza said he was not really certain, but added that it was no longer moving at an alarming rate. "The moisture in the mountain is slowing the combustion down but it is still spreading," he said.

He said authorities were not taking chances though and had sent volunteers to establish a fire line and lay boulders at the boundary of this city and Sta. Cruz to stop the fire from spreading farther.

The Davao City Central 911 also flew drones to determine which areas would be safe for the clearing operations.

"We have volunteers, fire rangers and those from the Special Rescue Unit of the Bureau of Fire Protection. The private sector was also helping by providing vehicles and food," Ragaza said.

He noted, however, that the volunteers and those sent by government agencies



AN AIR Force helicopter joins the fire-fighting mission.

HARRY CAMORRO/CONTRIBUTOR

were ill-equipped to fight the fire. What they were doing, he said, was to implement preventive measures.

Saturday's fire, which prompted the evacuation of nearly 1,000 trekkers who climbed to Apo's summit during the Holy Week, reportedly started at the Kapatagan trail here.

"The fire started at the peak and then razed areas toward Lake Venado (in North Cotabato) before spreading to the Davao del Sur and Davao City side," Elera said.

Authorities have not identified who started the blaze but suspected some campers.

While an investigation will be conducted, their concern at the moment is to prevent the fire from ravaging more areas.

Sta. Cruz Mayor Joel Ray Lopez canceled the annual Mt. Apo Boulder Face Challenge scheduled for October. "Mt. Apo should be rehabilitated after this fire," he said.

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A broader look at today's business

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'Mt. Apo blaze wake-up call to hire more forest guards'

By JONATHAN L. MAYUGA

THE forest fire that continues to raze Mount Apo in Mindanao underscores the need to hire more forest rangers and implement stricter measures, particularly in protected areas, to effectively protect the country's forests, officials of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said.

Mount Apo, the country's highest peak, is at the heart of the Mount Apo Natural Park (MANP), a key biodiversity area and a major priority conservation area in the Philippines.

It is one of the eight protected areas to earn the distinction as an Asean Heritage Park (AHP) in the Philippines. There are currently 37 AHPs in the Asean region.

Mount Apo is home to the critically endangered Philippine Eagle, the country's national symbol.

The fire that broke out on Saturday noon has so far gutted over 200 hectares of natural forests, according to news reports, but officials of the DENR said the damage could get worse if the fire will not be extinguished sooner.

In Davao, meanwhile, volunteers have begun digging fire lines to break the forest fire. The fire lines are being dug in the North Cotabato side of the mountain as the Energy Development Corp. deployed its personnel to strengthen the firefighting effort and save reforestation area in Maag, Makilala in North Cotabato from the massive blaze that entered its fourth day on Tuesday, the DENR said on its Facebook post.

The DENR added that the provincial government of North Cotabato and the local governments of Magpet, Kidapawan and Makilala towns were also expected to create their own fire lines "to prevent the fire from engulfing the closed canopy natural forests at the Magpet and

Davao City side."

"Volunteers have already been deployed in the area with tools purchased by the United States Agency for International Development-Biodiversity and Watersheds Improved for Stronger Economy and Ecosystem Resilience Project to help build the fire breaks," the DENR said.

Director Ricardo Calderon of the DENR's Forest Management Bureau (FMB) said the DENR is hiring more forest rangers to beef up the current number of personnel tasked to protect the forests.

Although Calderon said that National Greening Program (NGP) partners of the DENR also act as volunteer forest protectors or *bantay gubat*, there are only 2,014 forest rangers nationwide trained on forest protection against various threats, including forest fires.

"We are focusing on the training of our forest rangers. Nationwide, we have 2,014 forest rangers. Theoretically, with 15.8 million hectares of forestland, basically the ratio is one forest ranger for every 7,000 hectares. We have to maximize or optimize the use of these forest rangers. For every forest ranger diverted to do other tasks, we are leaving 7,000 hectares of forest unprotected," he said.

According to Calderon, the ideal ratio is one forest ranger for every 2,500 hectares.

This means that currently, a forest ranger is doing the task of three forest rangers, he said.

The situation is expected to improve as the DENR intends to hire around 2,000 forest rangers within the year.

"The hiring or appointment is ongoing. Forest rangers should be really used by the regions [DENR regional offices] [according to their job description], which is basically to protect our forest," he added.

Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim of the DENR's Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) said she had already asked the BMB division chief to coordinate with the DENR's regional office in Davao to look into the incident.

"If rainforest are still intact, it shouldn't be prone to fires. That means the forest has been disturbed. We should continue to work together to focus protection on our protected areas like Mount Apo and Mount Kanlaon. It's where our remaining natural forests are found," she said.

Lim added that members of the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) should continue to be vigilant to help the forest regenerate naturally.

"The diversity of trees and vegetation makes our natural forests more resilient, and therefore able to sustainably provide ecosystem services that can benefit communities that depend on protected areas for water, food livelihood and buffer them from impacts of climate change," she added.

Calderon, likewise, said that forest fires can be deadly and extremely destructive, especially because of the El Niño effect.

"As early as last year, we have already alerted our forest rangers and our DENR regional offices about the danger of forest fire during summer especially during El Niño when forest becomes more prone to fire," he said.

He added that the DENR regional offices are prepared to deal with such a crisis situation.

Eduardo Ragaza, the acting protected area superintendent of the MANP, said local disaster risk-reduction management councils of Davao del Norte and North Cotabato are jointly working with the Bureau of Fire Protection and the DENR to

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more forest guards'

contain the fire.

"Davao and South Cotabato side are rushing to contain the fire. We already conducted an aerial survey to identify the best area to clear to create a 2-meter fire line. This will hopefully prevent the fire from spreading in other areas," he said.

Ragaza said an investigation into the incident is also being conducted by authorities to determine what or who caused the fire, adding that the culprits will be held accountable for the damage.

The peak of Mount Apo where the fire is believed to have started is a camp site. He said climbers who camped in the area had just descended from the camp site when the fire broke out.

"They just left the area when the fire broke out. We are still investigating as to what really caused the fire," Ragaza said.

He said mountain climbers who have been evacuated are welcome to help extinguish the fire but would have to coordinate with proper authorities, adding that local disaster risk-reduction management councils are taking charge of the firefighting activities and had set up command centers near the affected areas.

MANP is frequented by mountain climbers, especially during the summer and Lenten season. It is also being considered by lumads and other ethnic groups as a "sacred mountain."

While it is being promoted for ecotourism, the MANP is supposed to be a highly-regulated area and climbers are supposed to be accompanied by tourist guides all the time to prevent them from "disturbing" the nesting sites of the Philippine Eagles in the area.

So far, he said the two Philippine Eagle nests are "safe" from the fire. "Our nests are far from the peak of Mount Apo," he said. *With Manuel T. Cayon*

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Recto urges deployment of more forest guards

REELECTIONIST Sen. Ralph Recto has called for the deployment of more forest guards as dry spells and El Niño, caused by climate change, leave forests tinder dry for long periods.

He deplored that there is only one forest guard for every 3,376 hectares of forestland, rendering the country's diminishing woodlands prone to poachers and leaving no frontline personnel to stomp out fires like the one razing the slopes of Mount Apo, the country's highest peak.

"The lack of forest rangers had reached general alarm a long time ago," said Recto, who got the data on the dearth of forest guards from official reports sent to the Senate.

Another reason Recto cited is the need to protect the gains of the National Greening Program (NGP), which had re-greened 1,125,701 hectares of mostly logged-over areas with 678 million seedlings since 2011.

"We have invested P24 billion for this massive reforestation program," said Recto, citing NGP's budget from 2011 to 2015. "We have to protect this investment. Parang mahal na bahay 'yan, kailangan ng fire extinguisher at fire insurance," he added.

The nationwide lack of forest guards can be gleaned from the number assigned in the Mount Apo National Park, which has 16 regular forest rangers guarding 54,975 hectares of main protected area.

"That's one guard for every 3,465 hectares. But if we include the 9,000 hectares of buffer and peripheral areas, the ratio goes up to almost one ranger per 4,000 hectares," he said.

Bernadette Tamayo

THE EXHIBIT OF PHILIPPINE PROGRESS
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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

US help sought to contain Mt. Apo fire

By ALEXANDER D. LOPEZ

DAVAO CITY – The American Chamber of Commerce in Mindanao (AMCHAM-Mindanao) yesterday sought the help of the US government in containing the fire that has already razed almost 300 hectares of forest cover inside the Mt. Apo Natural Park.

AMCHAM-Mindanao Chairman Philip Dizon told Manila Bulletin here that he already sent a message to the executive director of AMCHAM Philippines to air their concern to US Ambassador to the Philippines Philip Goldberg, saying the Philippine government might not have enough choppers with buckets to address the situation.

“I emailed out colleagues in the chamber especially our executive director to facilitate the needed support from the American government on the on going fight to contain this fire,” Dizon said, adding that natural resources inside the MANP are now at stake and in great danger.

He also recognized the cur-

rent efforts of the government with the support of the private sector in containing the fire but asserted that outside support is now needed to effectively end the tragedy.

Dizon added that he received reports on Monday evening, March 28 that fires are also threatening towards the northern portion of Mt. Apo.

“If the fire in the northern area is not contained it will endanger the areas of Mt. Talomo down to Eden and Baracata,” he said.

He also bared reports saying fire is also threatening the southern portion of the mountain towards Makilala area in North Cotabato.

“If this drought and fire continue the

whole Mt. Apo range will be burned. We need the American government's help,” Dizon emphasized in his message to AMCHAM executive director.

MANP is the home to around 800 vascular and non-vascular plant species and considered endemic in the area; an estimated 272 species of birds of which 40 percent or 111 are considered endemic in the area.

As of Tuesday morning, choppers from the Philippine Air Force (PAF) are already joining the operations by dropping waters through buckets in the areas hit by fire.

Dizon said the current support from PAF is not enough, more choppers with bucket are needed and the American

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government can provide the same.

Ground forces mostly from the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and volunteers from the regions 11 and 12 are in the slopes of Mt. Apo establishing fire lines to stop the spread of the fire.

More eco-guardians needed

Vice presidential candidate Sen. Francis "Chiz" Escudero said the fires that Mt. Apo and Mt. Kanlaon could have been prevented had the government hired enough "eco-guardians" to man the country's forest and protected areas.

Escudero, who chairs the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources, reiterated his call for the government to hire more forest guards using the environment conditional cash

transfer or ECCT, to address weak law enforcement, which is largely blamed for illegal logging and wildlife crimes.

The vice presidential candidate said the CCT program is one of the best mechanism the government can use to employ its beneficiaries in need of employment.

"If we have a CCT program for education, for maternity needs of our women, then we should include an environment CCT program," Escudero said.

"If one is living in the forest and you are helping guard it, you should be under the coverage of the CCT or 4Ps of the government as reward for your service," he said, referring to the government's Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) which is annual monetary dole out to poor constituents

in dire need of financial assistance.

CCT program gives out a monthly stipend of up to ₱1,400 to each family-beneficiary provided their children regularly attend school and the mothers, if pregnant, seek pre- and post-natal care, as part of government's efforts to improve the health, nutrition and education of children from the poorest sector of society.

Reports on burning of bushes at sitios located at the boundary of Davao City and Davao del Sur is said to be the cause of the forest fire at the highest peak of the Philippines.

On the other hand, two forest fires were reported on Mt. Kanlaon in Negros Island during the Holy Week, with one incident said to have started from a lit cigarette. (With a report from Hannas L. Torregoza)



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Fire on Mt. Apo 'alarmingly large'

NORTH COTABATO – A forest fire that hit Mt. Apo has been categorized as “alarmingly large.”

“It is now so wide,” Joey Recemilla, chairman of the eco-tourism community of the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) of Kidapawan City told reporters yesterday.

Recemilla said the fire, which started at the Kidapawan City trail on Saturday, spread to nearby timberlands.

Reports from the PAMB office said the fire is likely to spread to the Tamayong, Kulan, Tomnis and Godi-Godi timberlands, the portion of the mountain facing Santa Cruz town in Davao del Sur.

North Cotabato Gov. Emmylou Taliño-Mendoza on Monday said they deployed firefighters to prevent the blaze from spreading to the forests facing the towns of Magpet and Makilala and Kidapawan City.

“We are saddened by this very unfortunate development. We need to put out this fire as early as possible,” Mendoza said.

Agham party-list Rep. Angelo Palmones called for the total closure of Mt. Apo not only to save it from destruction due to forest fires, but also from trekkers and illegal settlers. – John Unson, Edith Regalado

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Burning flame

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Dinah S. Ventura

Fire has been eating through over 100 hectares of forest cover in Mt. Apo since Black Saturday, but it seems the alarm over. It hasn't blazed as much it would have over, say, the increase of prices of basic commodities or even the possibility of Manny Pacquiao announcing that he will run for president.

We tend to pay more attention only to those things that we feel will directly affect us, and fail to see how such incidents as a forest fire in faraway Mindanao may eventually make our lives miserable.

What is even worse is the way we continue to do things that we know to be wrong simply for the temporary satisfaction we may get from the action.

From jaywalking to improper disposal of trash, people ignore the existing laws just so they can achieve something faster. It is true that the lack of safe crossing places and garbage cans is a problem, but wouldn't it be better if we made the extra effort sometimes to follow the rules? Why risk getting hit by a car just so you can save your energy walking to a flyover and climbing the stairs to get to the other side?

So bring an umbrella is it is too hot or raining. Wear comfy shoes, bring a change of shirt and consider it as exercise. Why add to the flooding situation by flinging your mess out the window just so you don't have to hold on

to your candy wrapper a moment longer?

Environmental woes are very often experienced long after abuses have been committed. The pileup of garbage, the pollution in the air, water and land, the unchecked logging and deforestation—these are causes of the climate change we are suffering through now, and we don't seem to be able to do anything about it.

Hereabouts, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) may keep reminding people about their role in the environmental preservation, but it won't do any good if there is a lack of enforcement. The communities around Mt. Apo, for instance, have been asked to help prevent in making the fire woes worse in this mountain by avoiding open burning, but how is it that the fire has continued to destroy the forest?

It means people are still breaking the rules because experts say that in a place like Mt. Apo, fire is almost a hundred percent caused by man. The DENR says natural fire is impossible in the Philippines because rain douses sparks that may be caused by lightning.

An added complication is the difficulty in putting out these fires in the upper portions of the mountain because of inaccessibility. Mt. Apo is the country's highest peak at 3,143.6 meters above sea level. As the main attraction of the Mt. Apo Natural Park, it is imperative that the authorities nurture and protect it.

We have a diminishing forest cover as it is. Our natural landscapes are getting overridden by man-made structures. Local governments do not seem too concerned about the future of natural resources as they let instant gratification override their better instincts.

Protected areas, according to RA 9237, are "identified portions of land and water set aside by reason of their unique physical and biological significance, managed to enhance biological diversity and protected against destructive human exploitation."

Yet how many times have we heard of overdeveloped islands, permits to build indiscriminately granted to the detriment of nature or heritage? To top it all, in a situation like Mt. Apo, the DENR lacks the resources to deal with accidents, so it espouses prevention instead.

For this, however, education or information dissemination is needed, and in regular doses. Other places in the world that are protected always strictly implement their rules. Reminders are everywhere and guides are around to remind people some more if they forget to follow the rules.

It will take immense willpower to ensure that laws are enforced, especially for oft-ignored or neglected areas of concern like the environment.

Perhaps our controversial candidates like Manny Pacquiao should use their massive popularity to urge people to do something about their environment, to contribute to its preservation rather than defacing or destroying it through ignorance or neglect.

Of course, those who are in the position to actually do something about existing problems, such as the flames up in Mt. Apo, should really act on them now. There is no time to waste.

And please, people, let us do our part, even if no one is there to applaud. When it comes to our environment, our future is really in our hands.

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Save what we can

The Mt. Apo fire would not have been noticed had it not been the season of trekkers flocking the country's highest summit.

The alert was raised only on mid-Saturday, when most media offices were closed for the Lenten break. And just as the vacationers were heading home, they were greeted with the bad news: Apo is burning.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) downplayed "natural fire" as the likely cause of the fire.

DENR's Forest Protection Section chief Raul Briz said there's no natural fire in the Philippines, and that it was likely the fire came from open burning, or through undisciplined disposal of charred wood used for cooking or cigarette by people who visited Apo.

"Mountain fires nationwide are 99.9 percent man-made," he said as reports now claim more than 100 hectares of grassland have been consumed by fire.

The drought brought by El Niño exacerbated the situation, which the DENR now says is very difficult to control as the country has no capability to fight big forest fires by land and air.

The DENR has no water bombers for aerial firefighting and authorities often count on volunteers to man protected areas like Mt. Apo.

As the Mt. Apo fire rages, another report of forest fire was made out of Mt. Kanlaon.

It is likely the fire would rage more in the next few days before volunteers and the Bureau of Fire Protection would be able to contain it from spreading further.

The only good news to come out of that place at Easter Sunday were reports that mountaineers have all been accounted for and been put to safety.

But the fire has long been expected to happen.

It was still early march when businessman Philip Sonny Dizon asked the DENR to act on the continued burning of bushes at

several barangays at the boundary of Davao City and Davao del Sur.

Mindanews.com said Dizon, a farmer and president of the American Chamber of Commerce-Davao City chapter, estimated that the forest fires affected about 100 hectares in the highland Barangay Sibulan and Barangay Kapatagan in Digos City at the foot of Mt. Apo.

Still in the same article, *Mindanews* said: Dizon, who grows coffee and operates the Mt. Apo Highland Resort in Barangay Kapatagan, said he started to notice the forest fires since November last year and ongoing until today.

Local farmers, he claimed, are deliberately burning the plants to expand their farms.

Local government units, however, have not been giving them stern warnings at the least.

"The problem is that nobody is telling them to not burn," he said.

Mindanews said: "Fire incidents in the Davao Region from January to February 2016 increased by more than half with 207 cases as compared to 129 of the same period last year, according to Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP).



Aldrin Cardona

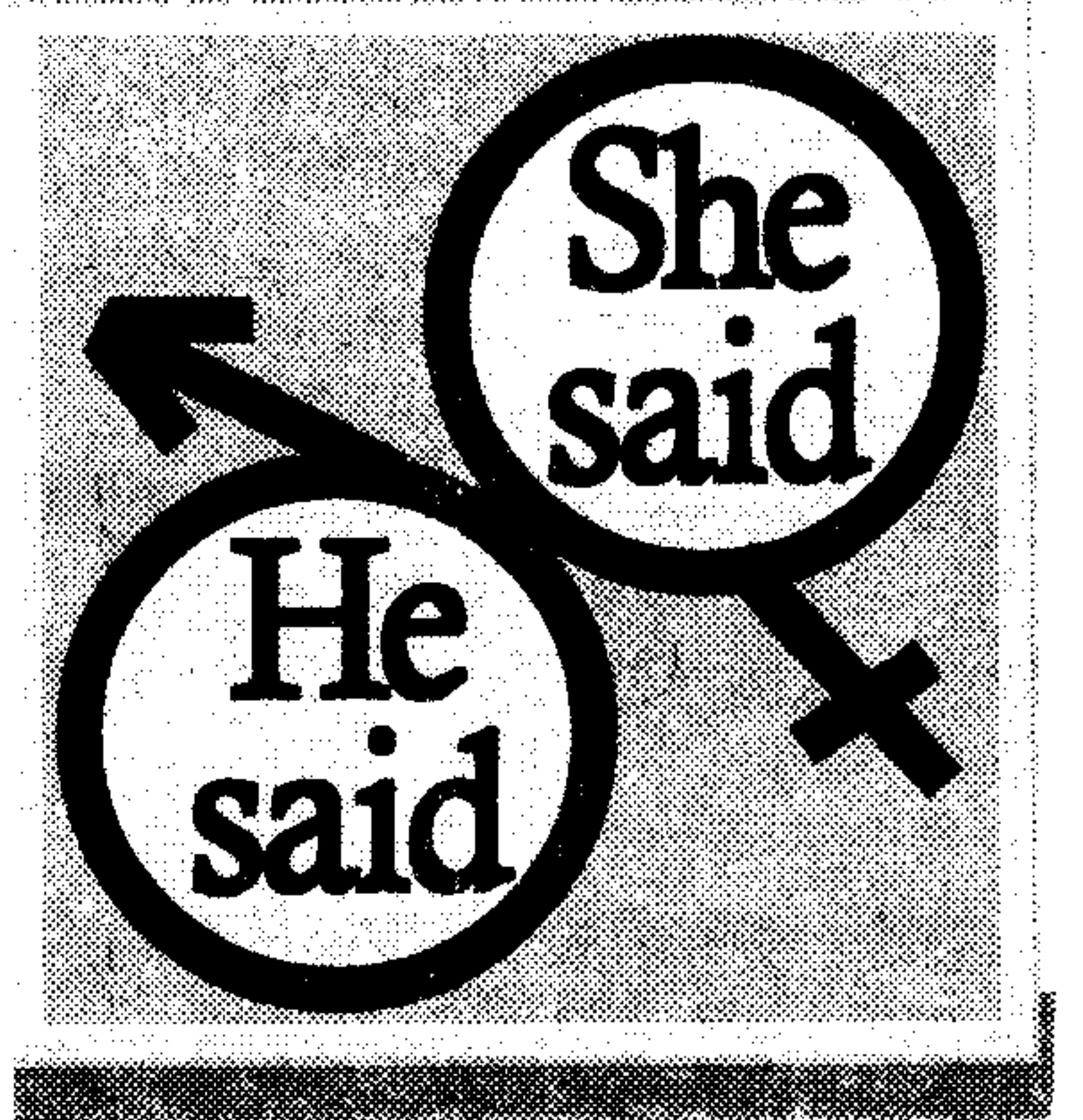
"Based on the bureau's documents, the total cost of damages was placed at P20.9 million, slightly lower than last year's P22.5 million.

"Fire Insp. Nestor Jimenez, chief of BFP 11's operations division, said the number grass fires spiked the highest with 85 cases, which grew by more than four folds from last year's 20 incidents.

It was also ironic that the Mt. Apo fire had to happen as the Fire Prevention Month was only about to close, and the region had just conducted activities that included a Fire Exit Drill and Earthquake Drill week in public and private schools, and government and private establishments, house-to-house fire safety inspections and lectures.

All these went for naught due to

one single spark.



THE **tribune**

Without fear or favor

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On a personal note, the Lenten break also exposed this rubbernecker to several expanse of land which would soon vanish and give way to modernization.

I consider my bi-weekly travel to Laguna a respite, with all those trees still up and covering the whole of Makiling.

I hope it stays that way for more generations to come. Or we would no longer be breathing in Manila if it vanishes just as quickly as we exclaim "air."

A long land travel in the national highways of Nueva Ecija, however, exposed now un-utilized or under-utilized rice fields, many of them now giving way to new villages and upper-class subdivisions that explain why we have been importing rice from our neighbors who used to envy our rice production ways.

Nueva Ecija's mountains, while still green, has deforested patches. Plenty of them, actually, that only grass make up for the absence of high greens.

It's the same in most parts of Batangas, where the once lush mountains have been taken over by communities.

We have not been able to see the future of these important sources of life.

Unlike the Makiling, which has been made a forest reserve, and Mt. Apo, which is a protected site, we have been overtaken by the population before we saw the importance of saving these mountains until it was too late.

We are losing this battle, really.
Because we are our own enemy.



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US help sought to end Mt. Apo fire

DAVAO CITY – The American Chamber of Commerce in Mindanao (AMCHAM-Mindanao) sought yesterday the help of the American government to extinguish the ongoing fire that has already razed almost 300 hectares of areas inside the Mt. Apo Natural Park (MANP).

AMCHAM-Mindanao chair businessman Philip Dizon said he has already sent a message to the executive director of AMCHAM Philippines to relay their concern to US Ambassador to the Philippines Philip Goldberg to act on their request.

"I emailed out colleagues in the chamber especially our executive director to facilitate the needed support from the American government on the ongoing fight to contain this fire," Dizon said, adding that natural resources inside the MANP are now at stake and in great danger.

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northern portion of Mt. Apo.

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"If this drought and fire

continue, the whole Mt. Apo range will be burned. We need the American government's help," Dizon emphasized in his message to AMCHAM executive director.

As of yesterday morning, choppers from the Philippine Air Force (PAF) were dropping waters through buckets in the areas hit by fire. **(Alexander Lopez)**

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- **Mt. Kanlaon
grassfire under
control — DENR**

BACOLOD CITY, Negros Occ. (PNA) — The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said the grassfire at Mt. Kanlaon Natural Park over the weekend has been put under control Sunday afternoon. The fire affected 120 hectares of grassland on the side of Mt. Kanlaon in Canlaon City, Negros Oriental. DENR-18 Regional Director Al Orolfo said the agency coordinated with the Canlaon local government in putting the fire under control through efforts of the Kanlaon Green Brigade. Orolfo said the blaze, which started Good Friday, did not reach the forest. No injuries were reported and no houses were affected. "We have 22 people on the ground now monitoring affected areas in Barangays Pula and Mananawin," he said. The DENR is investigating the cause of the fire. Initial reports said it may have started from a discarded still-burning cigarette butt.

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Sketches

By ANA MARIE PAMINTUAN

Countryside development

It's harvest time and the rice paddies in the Bicol region are gleaming with palay ready for reaping. The vast expanses of rice fields, coconut and banana plantations and vegetable plots end at the foot of mountains with equally lush forests.

A drive through the scenic countryside of Bicol is a reminder of how much our nation remains largely agrarian. Any poverty alleviation program, any aspiration for inclusive economic growth should give high priority to boosting agricultural production and developing agrarian communities.

Yet a drive through the Bicol countryside also shows the accuracy of the assessment of investors, that agriculture has been largely neglected.

In Camarines Norte on Black Saturday, I saw farmers bent over the paddies, manually cutting palay with scythes in the pounding early afternoon heat. Along some portions of the concrete pavement, palay was spread out to dry in the sun.

The scenes have not changed since my youth when I visited Bicol more often. Rice farming is still manual and farmers can't afford to take their palay to the mill for post-harvest services.

While the scenery was enchanting, poverty was glaring. Several villages have no electricity. Pails were lined up before communal artesian wells. Many communities were located a few kilometers away from public schools, and public transportation was rare. The few jeepneys and tricycles we encountered were so packed with passengers all the way to the rooftops it was amazing that the vehicles could negotiate the winding, sloping highway.

When there is no public transportation, what do the village children do, especially during the rainy season? Do they walk several kilometers to school or just help with the housework or in the farm? If they have a water buffalo, it can be used for transportation, but even a carabao is a luxury among the extremely poor.

Irrigation facilities at least seemed to be adequate in Bicol. I spotted several small river dams, which could partly account for the abundant harvest. The farms also look sufficiently supplied with fertilizer.



But agrarian communities need much more farm support if we want agriculture to flourish and become a key engine of poverty alleviation.

Apart from agrarian development, tourism offers immense potential for economic growth in rural areas. That long drive through Bicol and Quezon is among the most scenic in our country. The Bicol Natural Park of Camarines Norte and Sur and the Quezon National Forest Park, both with a sharply curved, steep slope called *bitukang manok* or chicken intestine, can be turned into major travel destinations offering adventure eco-tours through the dense forest.

A tourist center can be set up at the heart of the two parks, offering camping facilities, hiking, horseback riding, paragliding, ATV and bicycle rides. A zipline and cable car can be installed.

Tourism offers many livelihood opportunities, which can discourage villagers from seeking employment in cities. They can produce souvenir handicraft and local delicacies. Local businessmen can set up bed and breakfast accommodations – now in vogue in Albay – that can employ poor villagers. The availability of local jobs can ease urban migration and can mean fewer Pinoys going abroad for decent employment. Economic development can also drive away communist rebels from rural areas.

Albay has a fairly developed tourism thrust. The province recognizes the importance of eco-tourism. A declared Biosphere Reserve, Albay has increased its forest cover from 28,298 hectares in 2003 to the current 44,891 hectares. It is aiming for recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Mayon Volcano National Park is tentatively listed as a Heritage Site. The Cagsawa Ruins in Daraga, part of the volcano park, was recently included among the National Cultural Treasures by the National Historical Commission. The NHC has also declared as "national cultural properties" Daraga's Nuestra Señora de Porteria church, the Tabaco City church, and the Pighulugan Cave with 1,000-year-old artifacts in Misibis.

Economic activity around these areas has boomed. B&Bs have mushroomed in Legazpi City, offering traditional Pinoy TLC to guests. On Good Friday, there was no place to park near the Daraga church. In neighboring Camalig town, all the eateries offering *pinangat* were packed, and the stores selling various *pili* confections did brisk business.

Think of what such economic activities can do to the impoverished communities in the mountain areas.



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Countryside development

The World Travel and Tourism Council, in its latest report, estimated that the travel and tourism industry contributed P1.43 trillion – about 10.6 percent of GDP – to the Philippine economy last year and supported 1.3 million jobs. The direct contribution was placed at P569 billion – about 4.2 percent of GDP. Still, the country's target of 5.5 million international visitors this year is way below the original 10-million goal and the actual 2015 arrivals in neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

The economic figures can still grow exponentially with more investments in tourism infrastructure plus enhancements in developed destinations. By enhancements, I'm referring to facilities such as toilets, which are crummy even in Mayon and Cagsawa.

A major player in the travel industry told me that tour operators are embarrassed when they bring visitors to Pandan Island in Palawan's picturesque Honda Bay. The package tour includes a picnic lunch on Pandan, where there are no restrooms. People need to freshen up after a meal, and not everyone can pee behind a tree.

The industry player also lamented that Pagsanjan Falls and Hidden Valley in Laguna, once top tourist destinations, have deteriorated.

Private establishments can also use some advice in luring travelers. In Candelaria town a restaurant called Dada at Nene serves good Quezon *mami* and *bopis*, but without free drinking water; you have to buy their bottled water if you want to wash down your *goto*. The building also has no restroom; diners must go to another building within the compound used by bus passengers. Aren't restaurants required by law to have free drinking water and restrooms right within the premises?

Local governments must develop spots showcasing local products and cuisine. These spots need not be fancy; they just need to be clean and comfortable, with efficient service and no one giving customers the feeling that they're being ripped off. In Gumaca, Quezon, seafood and barbecue grills built on the water are tourist magnets.

Several countries in Asia and Europe have prospered from travel and tourism. But this needs a comprehensive tourism master plan, with the national government working with local officials as a team.

The next administration must come up with this comprehensive policy. Travel and eco-tourism can generate meaningful jobs, create livelihood opportunities, protect the environment and preserve our national heritage. Tourism, like agriculture, can promote inclusive growth.

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Negros' Kanlaon Volcano erupts

By HELEN FLORES

Kanlaon Volcano erupted last night, blanketing with ash villages in La Carlota City, Negros Occidental, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) said.

The eruption, which occurred at 6:20 p.m., produced a column of ash reaching 1,500 meters above the crater. The event lasted 12 minutes.

The event was accompanied by a booming sound heard in the villages of Ara-al and Yubo in La Carlota City, and Pula in Canlaon City, Negros Oriental.

Light ashfall was reported in Sitio Guintubdan, Barangay Ara-al, Phivolcs said.

Authorities warned local government units in the area and the public against entering the four-kilometer radius permanent danger zone of the volcano.

Phivolcs advised pilots to avoid flying close to the volcano's summit as airborne ash from the eruption could be hazardous to aircraft.



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PROBINSIYA

Aklan: 20-ektaryang kagubatan, nasunog

KALIBO, Aklan - Umabot sa 20 ektarya ng mga puno at pananim ang nasunog sa kabundukan ng Barangay Tibiawan sa Madalag, Aklan.

Ayon kay Julius Tiongson, ng Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP)-Kalibo, tanging fire suppression o pagpigil na kumalat ang apoy, ang kanilang nagawa dahil sa kakulangan ng gamit para tuluyang maapula ang pagliliyab.

Wala namang nasugatan o nasunog na istruktura sa pagliliyab sa kabundukan, na nagsimula noong Marso 26.

Sinabi ni Tiongson na batay sa imbestigasyon, isang residente ang nagsiga ng mga basura at ito ang pinagmulan ng apoy.

Jun N. Aguirre



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Poll bets urged to stop 'torturing' trees with campaign materials

By CORY MARTINEZ

TWO environmental groups have called on national and local candidates to spare defenseless trees from their campaign materials.

The EcoWaste Coalition and National Coalition to Save the Trees (NCST) made the call as the electoral campaign continues to heat up across the country.

NCST chairperson Fr. Robert Reyes said these acts of torture could stress out the trees and make them susceptible to decay-causing microorganisms, injurious insects and diseases leading to stunted growth, shorter lifespan and early death.

"We need trees to supply us and other animals with clean air to breathe, prevent deadly landslides and floods, as well as to protect us from global warming and climate change. Please don't hurt the trees to advance your political agenda," appealed Fr. Reyes.

EcoWaste Coalition coordinator Aileen Lucero said that poll candidates might claim they are not the ones committing these acts of torture on trees and pin the blame solely on their supporters.

"That is a lame excuse and unacceptable. Politicians have the responsibility to ensure that their campaign does not in any way harm trees and Mother Earth," stressed Lucero.

The groups added

that candidates placing campaign materials on trees would be violating Commission on Elections (Comelec) Resolution 10049, or the Rules and Regulations Implementing Republic Act 9006, the Fair Elections Act.

Under the said resolution, campaign materials should not be posted in public structures, schools, bridges, center islands, transportation terminals, waiting sheds, electric posts and wires, trees and other unauthorized places.

Harming trees also

goes against Republic Act 3571, which prohibits the "cutting, destroying or injuring of planted or growing trees, flowering plants and shrubs or plants of scenic value along public roads, in plazas, parks, school premises or in any other public ground."

The group likewise urged the Comelec, Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the Department of Interior and Local Government to intensify the "Basura-Free Election 2016" drive.

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Commonsense

By MARICHU A. VILLANUEVA

Appreciating Mother Nature

The observance of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are the only two official holidays in the Philippines that most of us employed in media entities get to enjoy two consecutive "no work" days in a year. Unfortunately, virus downed me in this year's Holy Week break. So I spent these two days of vacation at home, or "staycation" as it is now popularly called.



Feeling well on the third day, I managed to cajole my doctor son to drive us to a road trip for a half-day tour outside Metro Manila. Moreover, it augurs well for such road trips with the absence of perennial traffic jams in Metro Manila during this long holiday period.

Since I have to report back to work on Black Saturday after lunch at the latest, we decided to travel to the town of Pililla in the province of Rizal. This was after seeing the Facebook account of my sister showing photos of their excursion at Pililla, with giant windmills in the background.

With huge wind turbines standing on top of this mountainous area, it is no surprise that it is fast turning into a popular destination for local tourists.

So off we motored very early morning to Pililla, thinking the head start would give us enough time to enjoy the sights along the way. As expected, traffic was very light, as many Metro Manila folks were mostly out of town also.

Little did we realize, traffic gridlocks would hit us as soon as we reached the city of Antipolo. The Antipolo Church is one of the favorite pilgrim sites during Holy Week, that's why.

And traffic slows down as we get near any market or church areas along the towns of Baras, Morong, Tanay until we finally reached Pililla.

With cemented roads, it was easy for vehicles and even motorbikes to reach the highest spot where the wind farm is.

With huge wind turbines standing on top of this mountainous area, it is no surprise that it is fast turning into a popular destination for local tourists like me.

Located on a 60-hectare land in Barangay Halayhayin, the wind towers are visible on a clear day from Antipolo and from Laguna across the Laguna Lake. From where we stood, we could see the landscape and Metro Manila's skyscrapers.

Touring the area is also a learning experience for people who go there, especially for children. There are even picnic grounds for visitors. There are small stores selling refreshments and snacks and souvenirs of windmill magnets and desk decors.

It is a good thing that the wind farm operator – the Alternergy Wind One Corporation (AWOC) allows free entry in the wind farm. But since it is a power-generating site, security guards are visible all over the place.

From the reception gallery, we read that AWOC is headed by former Energy Secretary Vicente Perez Jr. as president and chairman. The Pililla Rizal Wind Power Project is the second wind project jointly developed by Pérez and his team who pioneered the development of Bangui Bay Wind Farm in Ilocos Norte, the first wind power plant in Southeast Asia.

At the reception area, visitors are given a crash course on how the wind farm operates and basic information such as:

- The Pililla Rizal Wind Farm achieved successful completion last June 2015, without any grid constraint or congestion to Metro Manila, the main power load in Luzon.
- Each wind tower can generate 2 megawatts (MW) of wind power, for a total of 54-MW capable to supply the electricity requirements of 66,000 households, including those living in nearby areas in Metro Manila.
- Each of the 27 wind towers is 125 meters tall or equivalent to a 33-storey building.
- Connected to the 10-kilometer line to distribution network of the Manila Electric Co. (Meralco), it is now supplying clean electricity to Metro Manila and Rizal.
- The Pililla Rizal Wind Farm has also recently secured the Certificate of Compliance (COC) under the Feed-in-Tariff.

Each tower was supplied by GAMESA of Pamplona, Spain where we had the opportunity to visit its manufacturing plant about four years ago. We went there as participant to a renewable energy (RE) educational tour for media.



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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Appreciating Mother Nature

Other than hydropower, geo-thermal and solar energy among RE power plants we have here, the Philippines is the first country among the ten-member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to develop grid wind power since 2005.

One of the largest RE companies in the Philippines is the Energy Development Corp. (EDC). A subsidiary company of the Lopez-owned First Gen, the EDC operates more than 1,188-MW of geothermal; 132-MW of hydro; 150-MW of wind and 4-MW of solar spread from Ilocos, Nueva Ecija, Sorsogon, Leyte, Negros and Mt. Apo in Mindanao.

These are RE generating plants that hew closely to the use of so-called "green" or clean energy sources instead of fossil fuel and coal-fired plants classified as heavy carbon emitters that contribute to global warming and climate change.

For its environment-friendly power generating plants, First Gen chairman and chief executive officer Federico "Piki" Lopez was invited to speak in one of the Climate Change Project breakout sessions with former US Vice President Al Gore held most recently here in Manila. "Many of our energy facilities are located alongside lush beautiful watershed areas that are home to so many amazing flora and fauna that's practically a showcase of our country's bio-diversity, one of the richest in the world," Lopez cited in his speech.

This is why, Lopez said, the EDC entered into partnership with the University of the Philippines Institute of Biology (UPIB) to study the biodiversity around all its energy facilities to better understand the ecosystem and how best to protect the area through such programs as reforestation.

In the course of reforestation of more than 10,000 hectares of lands with 6.5 million trees since 2008, Lopez said the EDC came across many "incredible living things" within their concession areas – from the Philippine Eagle in Mt. Apo to tarsiers in Leyte, some species of Flying Foxes, and Wild Philippine Ducks, to name some.

And just recently, he added, the UPIB discovered in EDC hydropower plant in Pantabangan in Nueva Ecija a new species of Rafflesia, named *Rafflesia consuelloae* which is now officially the world's smallest and best smelling wild flower.

So whether it's a wind farm or solar farm, one thing our RE operators must take into account is turning them also into a tourist destination freely available to people to appreciate Mother Nature.



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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Acosta to appeal graft conviction

By MICHAEL PUNONGBAYAN

Former Bukidnon congressman Nereus Acosta yesterday said he would appeal the decision of the Sandiganbayan convicting him and his mother of graft over the alleged misuse of pork barrel funds.

Acosta expressed dismay over how the anti-graft court's Fourth

Division acquitted him in two cases but found him guilty in the third.

"While we are grateful for my acquittal in the two graft cases in the Fourth Division and the acquittal of the perjury case in the Fifth Division, we are saddened and perplexed

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Acosta From Page 1

with the decision of this one case connected with the above-mentioned cases," Acosta said in a statement.

He said the conviction also came two months after another division of the Sandiganbayan cleared him of perjury charges still in relation to his alleged misuse of priority development assistance fund (PDAF) allocations.

Acosta, presidential adviser on environmental protection and general manager of the Laguna Lake Development Authority (LLDA), was sentenced to a maximum of 10 years in jail.

His mother Socorro, former mayor of the municipality of Manolo Fortich, was also found guilty of two counts of graft.

The convictions stemmed from the allegedly questionable release of P5.5 million in pork barrel funds to the Bukidnon Vegetable Producers Cooperative in 2002.

"We will submit ourselves to the rule of law and will exercise our legal right to appeal the decision," Acosta said of the Sandiganbayan decisions convicting him and his mother.

Both of them have posted additional bail while the cases are being prepared for appeal before the Supreme Court.

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

PNoy creates body focused on Laguna Lake project

By MADEL R. SABATER NAMIT

President Aquino has signed Executive Order (EO) No. 202 creating an Inter-Agency Technical Committee (IATC) for the Laguna Lakeshore Expressway Dike Project (LLEDP).

The EO was signed by the President on March 22, 2016.

Under the said EO, the IATC shall be composed of technical representatives of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), Laguna Lake Development Authority (LLDA), Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), and the Philippine Reclamation Authority (PRA).

The President tasked the IATC to assist the DPWH and the LLDA in the implementation of the LLEDP and in resolving issues arising from the implementation of the LLEDP.

The IATC shall, likewise, ensure that all aspects of the LLEDP, including the relocation of the LLEDP-affected inhabitants, waste management, reclamation, environmental protection, property development, and construction, are consistent with the requirements of all applicable laws, rules, and regulations.

The EO shall take effect immediately.

It will be recalled that the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Board approved the LLEDP in June, 2014, to be implemented by the DPWH as the implementing agency, and the LLDA as the cooperating agency, under a public-private partnership scheme pursuant to the Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) Law.

The total cost of the project is pegged at ₱122.811-billion. Once completed, it is expected to reduce travel time from Bicutan to Los Baños from 90 to 35 minutes. It will serve as an alternate route to the often-congested national highway between Calamba and Los Baños in Laguna.



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EcoWaste calls for trash-free campaign

Environmentalists yesterday called on local candidates in the May 9 elections to ensure that their proclamation rallies and campaign activities are garbage-free.

The EcoWaste Coalition made the appeal after trash and campaign materials reportedly littered the streets of Manila after reelectionist Mayor Joseph Estrada and his rival, Alfredo Lim, launched their campaigns on Monday.

"There is no justification for turning parks and streets into dumping grounds," EcoWaste coordinator Aileen Lucero said.

"The candidates should clean up their mess after the campaign and request their supporters to mind their garbage," Lucero said.

The group said Estrada's supporters littered Liwasang Bonifacio with campaign leaflets, cardboard hand fans, plastic bottles, food containers, fast food wrappers, snack packs and fish ball sticks.

Supporters of Lim left posters and other campaign materials in Plaza Miranda.

Common poster area

The Quezon City government urged candidates to display their campaign materials in the common poster area set by the Commission on Elections.

Dexter Cardenas, head of the city's Department of Public Order and Safety, said they have collected tons of illegal posters since the campaign period for local candidates started on March 19.

He said they would continue conducting Oplan Baklas to remove illegal campaign materials.

Meanwhile, the Manila Police District (MPD) said the traffic situation during Estrada's proclamation at Liwasang Bonifacio was manageable.

Superintendent Olivia Sagaysay, MPD traffic enforcement unit chief, said only the portion of Magallanes Drive Extension had to be closed for the event.

"We did not receive any complaint from the motorists and commuters," Sagaysay said. —
Rhodina Villanueva, Jose Rodel Clapano, Robertzon Ramirez

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

ELECTION 2016: AGENDA OF THE BAGUIO CITY MAYOR

ENVIRONMENT

REGREENING. Reforestation is a key Philippine commitment to mitigate the impact of climate change. But even before weather changes have drawn attention back to the importance of forests, regreening Baguio has been a concern for city residents whose daily water supply is rationed.

According to the government, Baguio's remaining forest cover spans 1,446.81 hectares (roughly 20 percent of the mountain city's 57.5-square kilometer territory), but many of these trees are within private properties.

Reforestation efforts also depend on each administration's programs and fund allocations. Reforestation should be a sustained and regulated program, with measured targets and accountable officials in a mountain community that calls itself the City of Pines.

- Efforts at cleaning the environment are measurable. [Improving] the existing forest cover by 30 percent is doable by encouraging residential, group and community efforts to plant trees and other vegetative cover in their areas.
- Air quality could be improved by 30 percent by ensuring that every vehicle pass smoke emission standards and making sure no one burns trash.
- Waterways quality could be improved by 30 percent through community and household clearing efforts. No additional budgets are needed, but execution and implementation could be achieved through cooperation. This is doable in the first year.

- The regreening of our city is part of our priority programs that we will continue to do. Since we resumed office as the "city's janitor" in 2010, we were able to work out the production of 124,611 assorted seedlings and the planting of 89,217 of these in various parts of the city that contributed to the sustained greenery of our greenbelt areas. This is also in compliance with the government's national greening program (NGP).

- Maintaining the city forest requires two things: Curb the sale of forest lands to developers and control migration. Trees in privatized forest lands are cut to give way to buildings and houses. This affects the water supply. Water is a resource that shrinks at the same rate as the growth of the Baguio population.

- It should also be mandatory for every household to plant a tree.

- We need to have a moratorium on subdivision development in Baguio and encourage tenement type structures to rise in the surrounding municipalities for low cost housing, to change the landscape of Baguio. Instead of buildings and houses, we can develop more areas filled with green and fruit bearing trees, flowers and edible vegetables.
- We must encourage informal settlers to relocate to low-cost tenements. Schools near the central business district must likewise be relocated to ease traffic. We take care and enhance the heritage sites to be tourist destinations, including the city market. This would transform Baguio from a squatter city to an organized city.
- We should put methane gas collection chambers near the city market and the city slaughterhouse so that water discharged from these areas is filtered before it is released to rivers in the lowlands.

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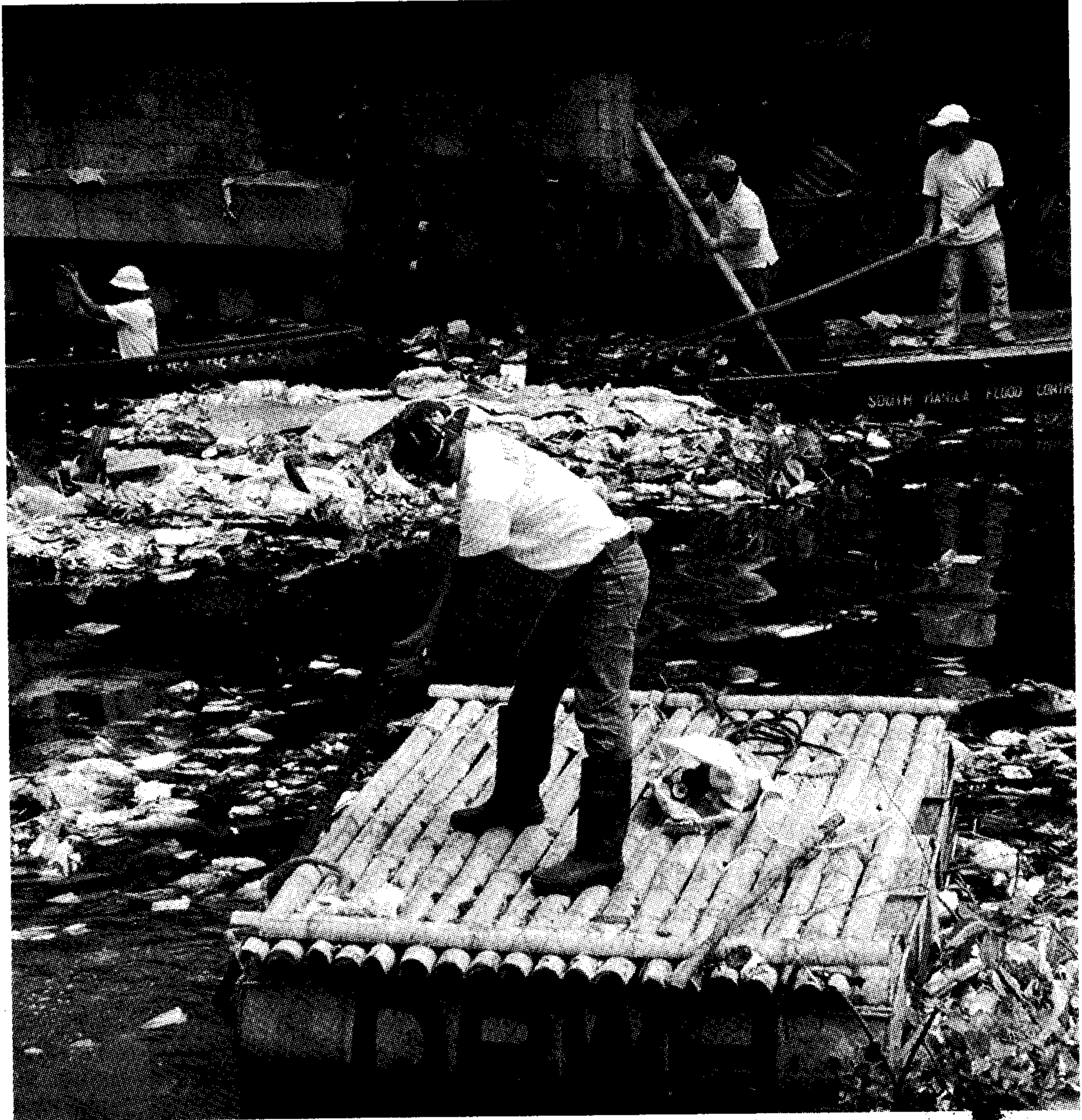
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HALOS dalawang linggo nang nililinis ng mga tauhan ng MMDA ang estero ng P. Casal bridge sa Maynila subalit hindi pa rin maubos-ubos ang mga naglutangang basura. Kuha ni **BENJIE CUARESMA**

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

El Niño continues to weaken, says Aussie experts

By Ronnel W. Domingo

THE EL NIÑO weather phenomenon continued to weaken in the tropical Pacific with ocean waters found at their coolest in 14 months, according to Australian climate experts.

"Temperatures below the ocean surface have cooled steadily, with only the top 50 meters more than one degree Celsius warmer than normal," the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) in Australia said in its latest update.

"It is likely this is the coolest this top layer of ocean has been since January 2015," the agency added.

The bureau added that such changes in the ocean were reflected

in atmospheric conditions, including wind direction.

"However, some indicators, such as cloudiness near the [international] date line, have been slower to respond and still show a clear El Niño signal.

Citing projections based on climate models from various climate agencies worldwide, the BoM said the El Niño would continue to weaken during the southern autumn [spring in the northern hemisphere] and will return to neutral levels by mid-2016.

A "neutral" scenario means there is neither El Niño nor La Niña, which has opposite effects in terms of the amount of rainfall.

Earlier this month, the Philippine Statistics Authority said the prolonged dry spell pushed down the forecast palay output in the first quarter of 2016 to 4.07 million tons, which was 300,000 tons or 6.8 percent lower compared to the actual harvest last year.

The PSA said in its latest quarterly production outlook the volume may decrease amid lower yield and smaller area harvested.

"Probable decreases in production, harvest area, and yield could be due to the insufficient water supply and intense heat brought about by prolonged dry spell during the reproductive

and maturing stages of the crop," the PSA said.

Also, the adverse effects of typhoon "Nona," which ravaged farms in the northern part of the country last December, may result to smaller harvest areas in Cagayan as well as lower yield in Aurora.

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Land planted to sugarcane declines amid El Niño-driven shift to pineapple crop

SUGARCANE acreage area in the last completed crop year contracted by 1.63% compared with the previous season, the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) said.

In an e-mail, the SRA said the land area planted to sugarcane in the 2015-2016 cycle dropped to 410,105.96 hectares (ha) compared with 2014-2015.

The SRA's head, Regina Martin, said conversion of land for use in solar and agro-industrial projects was behind the decline.

The president of the Sugar Alliance of the Philippines, Manuel R. Lamata, also pointed to conversions, noting that housing played a part, while farmers were also drawn to other crops.

Ms. Martin noted that corn and pineapple could have pulled down the acreage for cane in the last crop cycle.

In January, pineapple and pineapple products topped Philippine Statistics Authority's list of "Philippine Exports to All Countries," with a value of \$60.93 million, a jump of 90.5% year on year.

In volume terms, pineapple output in the last quarter of 2015 was estimated at 670,000 metric tons (MT), 1.7% higher than the year-earlier level.

Meanwhile, the corn sector had 2.5 million hectares in acreage with a yield averaging of 4 MT per hectare.

In crop year 2014-2015, corn output was 7.553 million metric tons (MMT), slightly lower than the 7.671 MMT recorded a year earlier, according to data cited by the Philippine Maize Federation Inc., (Philmaize).

The decline in corn yields, PhilMaize president Roger Navarro said, could be blamed on the El Niño particularly in Northern Mindanao.



BW FILE PHOTO

Mr. Navarro, however, assured that corn producers can expect better yields and export more after the a joint department circular on the safe handling of modern biotechnology products was signed by various regulators.

"With the new JDC (joint department circular) for biotechnology, local corn farmers have better chances of tapping the export market because we will continue reaping higher yields with Bt corn," Mr. Navarro said in an interview.

The country produces mainly yellow corn, of which 70% goes to feed mills, while 30% is white corn which is used for food products, including corn oil and starch, among others.

Farmers have been driven to crops that better resist El Niño effects, including corn and pineapple.

Sugarcane growing areas in the country cover 29 Mill Districts with Luzon having seven including one newly created for Isabela which is dedicated to bioethanol fuel.

Some 19 MDs are in the Visayas with four on Panay, two in the Eastern and Central Visayas; two in Negros Oriental; and 11 in Negros Occidental.

Mindanao has three districts. — **Janina C. Lim**

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

DRY SPELL

In Zamboanga City, grass fires reported

By Julie S. Alipala
Inquirer Mindanao

ZAMBOANGA CITY—Apart from a forest fire raging for several days now on Mount Apo on its eastern end, Mindanao is beset with another persistent ecological and livelihood problem on its opposite end in Zamboanga—grass fires amid a lingering dry spell.

A total of 83 grass fires have been reported with regularity in Zamboanga City since January, according to Chief Insp. Clint Cha of the city's fire department. Last week alone, 14 were recorded, including those in Barangay Salaan and in Sitio Muroc in Barangay Pasonanca that razed about 20 hectares of grassy and forested areas.

"The El Niño phenomenon is causing more rivers to dry up. Green grasses and weeds are drying fast. Even trees are becoming more vulnerable to fire, especially from smokers," Cha said.

He blamed "kaingineros" (slash-and-burn farmers) for starting some of the fires and smokers who carelessly threw away their cigarette butts.

The official raised fears that the grass fires in the hilly areas could reach households.

Controlling the fires was being complicated by the hardly accessible terrain in several burning areas and the scarcity of water due to the dry spell, Cha said. "Our fire trucks were not designed to reach [the hilly areas]," he pointed out.

Elmer Apolinario, the assistant city administrator, said the city government converted two swimming pools in Barangay Pasonanca into water storage facilities. "Our firefighters can easily get water from the pools," he said.

The Bureau of Fire Protection has recruited villagers to form a "hampas" (backlash) brigade, which uses fresh tree branches and twigs to drub and snuff out the flames.

Cha said the slash-and-burn farmers were being made to understand that what they had been doing was dangerous and could lead to more serious problems, especially if the fire reaches the residential areas.

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• El Niño-hit LGUs to be validated for possible aid

ILOILO CITY (PNA) – The Regional Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (RDRRMC) through the provincial DRRMCs is monitoring areas in Western Visayas hit by the prolonged dry season, or El Niño phenomenon. Civil Defense Regional Director Rosario Cabrera said these areas are also advised to submit a report to the National DRRMC (NDRRMC) for validation for possible fund augmentation. "If there is need for augmentation, the NDRRMC will have to look into the report. Their report should be the bases," Cabrera said. The Office of the Civil Defense (OCD) here has already received a damage report from Capiz province and another one on the declaration of state of calamity in the island province of Guimaras. Sta. Barbara, town in Iloilo province also declared a state of calamity but the provincial agriculturist office does not yet see the urgency of placing the entire province under similar condition. Iloilo City was also placed under a state of calamity due to lack of water. Cabrera said the RDRRMC will also coordinate closely with the Department of Agriculture (DA) for reports on the impact of El Niño. Last week, the DA, in a yet to be validated report, said that as of February, damage due to El Niño has reached ₱1.22 billion for rice crops and ₱56.247 million for corn.

Advocate wants climate change center in Eastern Visayas using survival fund

TACLOBAN CITY—An environmental planner is pushing for the establishment of an Eastern Visayas Regional Climate Change Center and Information Network utilizing the Peoples Survival Fund.

Nestor Tabungar, private sector representative of the regional land use committee and owner of environmental planning firm, Phil-World Gateway said the proposed center needs an initial investment of P20 million.

The project cost will cover site development, multi-story building construction, office furniture and fixtures, audio-visual equipments, information technology hardware and soft ware,

computers and printers, loaded vehicles, and power generation facilities.

“Under Republic Act 10174, the PSF can be used to support adaptation activities of local governments and communities such as establishment of regional centers and information networks,” Tabungar said.

The proposed location for the center is a vacant lot at the Eastern Visayas State University main campus in this city.

The center will provide information on water resources management, land management, agriculture and fisheries, health, infrastructure development, natural ecosystems.

The facility will also improve forecasting and early

warning systems as part of preparedness for climate-related hazards, help local government boost their disaster preparedness.

“The center will support institutional development, for local governments, in partnership with local communities and civil society groups, for preventive measures, planning, preparedness and management of impacts relating to climate change, including contingency planning in areas prone to extreme climate events,” Tabungar explained.

The proponent is seeking a resolution from the Regional Development Council endorsing the project for funding by the Climate Change Commission. **PNA**



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PNOC-Renewables putting up solar rooftop in UP Diliman

The renewable energy arm of state-run Philippine National Oil Co. (PNOC) is putting up another solar rooftop project, this time at the University of the Philippines in Diliman.

PNOC-Renewables Corp. is eyeing to install a 240-kilowatt peak (kWp) grid-tied solar rooftop project at the UP main campus and is auctioning off the engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) as well as the operation and maintenance (O&M) contract for the project.

In a bid bulletin published yesterday, PNOC-RC said it is looking for a firm that will design, supply, deliver, install, test and commission, and operate and maintain the solar rooftop project for five years.

The contract has an approved budget of P15.42 million for the EPC and commissioning component and P1.32 million for the O&M component, for a total cost of P16.74 million.

PNOC-RC has set the pre-bidding conference on April 1 at its head office in Taguig City. Deadline for the submission of bids is on April 13.

Participants can conduct a site visit for the project on April 4.

Meanwhile, PNOC-RC moved the bidding for the

80-kWp solar rooftop project at the Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) in Quezon City at the same dates.

The PCA project has approved a budget of P5.2 million for the EPC and commissioning component while the O&M part will have a budget of P440,000 for a total of P5.64 million.

The winning bidders for each project will be given 120 calendar days for the EPC, including the 30-day performance test, once the notice to proceed (NTP) is issued.

PNOC-RC is promoting the use of renewable, clean and green energy resources such as solar power in government

agencies and offices such as the Department of Science and Technology in Taguig City, the Philippine Heart Center-Medical Arts Building in Quezon City, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources Environment Management Bureau and the Department of Health.

- Danessa Rivera

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THE CLEAN-ENERGY DEADLINE IS SOONER THAN WE THINK

By Mark Buchanan

EVERYONE knows that at some point, if we want to contain climate change, we'll have to stop building polluting power plants. New research suggests that moment may come much sooner than we realize.

In some areas, the world is making progress toward reducing harmful emissions. Earlier this year, the Business Council for Sustainable Energy reported that the use of coal-fired plants for electricity generation in the US fell to the lowest level in 60 years. Some of the biggest US coal mining outfits have filed for bankruptcy. Electricity from coal looks set to become increasingly rare in China as well. That's good news for anyone hoping that humanity might still manage to reduce carbon emissions enough to avoid warming the Earth's climate past the two degrees Celsius that scientists

see as dangerous.

Even so, trends globally aren't so encouraging. Developing nations plan to build a lot more fossil-fuel generating stations, and global carbon emissions are still increasing. Electricity generation still contributes about one-fourth of all human-created greenhouse gas emissions. The crucial question, then, is whether we will manage the transition to zero carbon production in time—and how much time we have.

A new study by researchers from Oxford University's Institute for New Economic Thinking offers an answer. In short, we have only a year or so to stop investing in new fossil-fuel power stations. After that, the expected emissions from those plants over their economic lifetime will commit us—barring other exceptional changes—to shoot past the two degree limit. This means we face

crucial choices right now.

The trouble, as Alexander Pfeiffer and colleagues point out, is the amount of emissions already built into the system. Electricity infrastructure lasts a long time: Some thermal plants in the European Union are as much as 50 years old, and we should expect new plants to be used over a similar period of time. So the stock of existing plants, and any new construction, has repercussions for emissions decades into the future.

Climate dynamics add to the inertia. Once put into the atmosphere, carbon dioxide lasts for centuries, contributing to warming all the while. It's the total stock of carbon in the atmosphere, not what we happen to be emitting now, that matters most. Even if we reduce emissions quickly, the stock will decline much more slowly.

Taking these inertias into account, and using data from the

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The clean-energy deadline is
sooner than we think

IPCC on global carbon budgets and various scenarios for plausible future emissions and technology changes, Pfeiffer and colleagues analyzed how long we can go on building new fossil fuel power plants if we want to have a decent chance—say, 50 percent—of staying within the two degree limit. To that end, they introduced the concept of the “two degree capital stock”—the total amount of electricity generating capital we can create before we’ve locked ourselves into dangerous warming.

By their estimate, if we don’t shift all new electricity generation investment to zero-carbon technology by the end of 2017, we will face a number of unpalatable alternatives. They include accepting the likelihood of warming beyond the two degree limit, shutting down and writing off lots of the world’s energy assets or putting our hopes on carbon-capture technology that

does not yet exist.

Pfeiffer and colleagues don’t mean to be doomsayers. Their aim is to help policy makers get a more realistic view of the time available for making the shift to clean energy. National commitments to phase out fossil fuel power generation tend to focus on targets for emissions reductions. The EU, for example, aims to cut 40 percent by 2030. But emissions at any moment aren’t directly linked to the atmospheric carbon stock that causes warming, nor do they reflect the future trajectory of carbon emissions implied by existing infrastructure.

Policy makers need to think a lot more about the repercussions of the fossil fuel power plants currently being planned, as well as associated coal mines and oil and gas fields. What we do today will affect the options available to us for decades to come. **Bloomberg**