

Raise buying price for coconut farmers, traders warned

MANILA -- Agitated by reports of coconut traders with cheap buying price for farmers' produce, Agriculture Secretary Manny Piñol said he is bent on excluding these traders from huge European deals.

In a statement sent to the Philippine News Agency Wednesday, Piñol has decided to rule out those who did not heed his appeal to increase the buying price of copra.

"I will make sure that only those who are willing to help the coconut farmers will be included in this Eastern European Marketing deal," Piñol said.

In 2018, the buying price of copra, the main source of livelihood of the country's coconut farmers, dropped to PHP15 per kilo, which is significantly lower than the PHP40 per kilo recorded in previous years.

While domestic copra prices declined steeply in 2018 due to oversupply, the glut in vegetable oil in the international market also pulled down the price of coconut oil.

"I met with many of you and appealed for help by setting an agreed buying price of at least PHP25 per kilo," he recalled. "Some of you heeded my appeal to increase your buying price but most of you did not. Not even when the farmers were already crying that they could not even earn enough to pay for the workers did you listen to my plea."

On Monday, the agriculture secretary closed a deal with Monaco-based Russian businessman, Igor Malyshkov, whose friends and associates owning a chain of 15,000 supermarkets in Eastern Europe including the Russian Federation helped the country open this huge market.

"I will persuade Malyshkov and his group to exclude the greedy and the heartless among you, especially those who exploited the farmers," he said.

By next week, the marketing group of the Department of Agriculture will monitor the traders' buying price for copra and whole coco-

nuts as well as enlist those who did not abide by Piñol's call to raise the price to at least PHP25 per kilo.

"If your buying price is below PHP25, as we have earlier agreed, you will be excluded from this supply deal in Eastern Europe," he added.

Malyshkov, who represents Austria-registered Arteks Generation, called on Piñol on Monday to signify his group's interest in importing coconut products from the Philippines, including palm oil and pineapple, to thousands of outlets all over Eastern Europe.

The businessman said the interest to import coconuts from the Philippines is due to the huge demand in the Eastern European market where consumers are becoming more health conscious.

"As the demand rises, we will also expect you to increase your buying price. I believe this is just fair. You have a few days to adjust your buying price. This is just a friendly reminder," Piñol said. (PNA)

Stability in South China Sea tackled in PH, Vietnam meet

MANILA -- Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. and his Vietnamese counterpart on Wednesday had an "in-depth and substantive discussion" on regional issues, including the disputed South China Sea.

"We both underlined the importance of maintaining peace, stability, safety and security of navigation in the South China Sea, peaceful resolution of dispute, and respecting the diplomatic and legal processes, respecting international law, including UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) 1982," Vietnam Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh said in a press briefing.

During the meeting, Minh also underscored the "full observance of the Declaration of Conduct" toward the early conclusion of an effective and substantive

Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC).

Vietnam and the Philippines, along with some member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have contesting claims in the disputed South China Sea with Beijing, which asserts almost 90 percent of the waters with its invisible demarcation called the nine-dash line.

The territorial spat has yet to be settled but Hanoi, Manila, and other claimants have committed to work alongside China toward the conclusion of the COC.

Currently, the Philippines is sitting as the country coordinator for the ASEAN-China dialogue where parties negotiate for the finalized COC.

Minh said he spoke highly of the Philippines' role as he noted that Manila pledged to support Vietnam to successfully chair the

ASEAN in 2020.

Minh held talks with Locsin during the 9th Vietnam-Philippines Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) meeting in Manila where he also reaffirmed the two nations' "strategic partnership." (PNA)

Skills training slots to open for PH youth

MANILA -- At least 370 slots for skills training that may lead to employment will soon be available for Filipino youths who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The Philippine Business for Education (PBE), an advocacy group providing opportunities for Filipino youths, signed five agreements with schools and organizations to provide technical-vocational education.

In a statement on Wednesday, PBE said it signed memoranda of understanding with Miriam College, the Cagayan de Oro Chamber of Com-

Solon underscores need to strengthen NFA under new mandate

MANILA -- A lawmaker at the House of Representatives on Wednesday underscored the need for the government to institutionally strengthen the National Food Authority (NFA) for the agency to effectively carry out its mandate under the rice tariffication regime.

Butil Party-list Rep. Cecil Chavez noted that in its present "diminished" state, the NFA lacks the funds, the logistics and the facilities to undertake its new mandate of buying palay (unhusked rice) for buffer stocking for national emergencies.

"The NFA is in an overwhelming state and is hobbled by financial, logistical and personnel morale problems, and it needs propping up to be able to undertake its new mandate under the new rice import liberalization regime," Chavez said.

"The NFA has no funds for palay buying, lacks the facilities to undertake palay buying, and lack the silos and related facilities for the storage of the palay acquired," she added.

Chavez stressed that she supports the continued existence of the NFA and supports any and all efforts to assign the NFA with palay-buying functions.

However, she said the reality is that NFA cannot do that function unless government makes the necessary interventions.

"Much as we want the NFA to indeed buy palay from farmers at prices above the production cost,

we cannot see how a diminished NFA can do that role effectively unless it is strengthened as an institution," Chavez said.

Chavez made the observation after the Department of Agriculture (DA) released the details of the amended implementing rules for the rice import liberalization law or Republic Act (RA) 11203 that President Rodrigo Duterte signed on February 14.

Under the measure, the NFA is to tasked buy palay from local farmers "all-year-round" for buffer stocking purposes.

Meanwhile, Chavez urged farmers' organizations across the country to unite and monitor the implementation of the safety nets and support mechanisms to rice farmers under RA 11203.

She said this would en-

ing to employment.

PBE said Punlaan School will open its doors to train at least 40 women in hospitality and culinary courses.

Miriam College will develop an Alternative Learning System Senior High School diploma in partnership with a leading construction company for training and employment.

Cagayan de Oro Chamber member companies will participate in the project's work-based training program while Cebu-based organizations will support 330 youth in engineering technology and construction-related skills.

Launched in 2018, YouthWorks PH is PBE's five-year

sure that the grand promises provided by the law are kept and translated "into workable and viable safety net programs."

RA 11203 creates a Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) that is intended to serve as a special rice safeguard to protect the local rice industry.

The RCEF, which has an annual allocation of PHP10 billion from the General Appropriations Act for the next six years, will be distributed accordingly: 50 percent for machinery and equipment; 30 percent for rice seed development, propagation and promotion; 10 percent for expanded rice credit assistance; and 10 percent for rice extension services.

Under the measure, the fund would be allocated and disbursed to rice-producing areas. (PNA)

tor in working global models of workforce development programs," Brian Levey, director of the USAID Office of Education, said.

Karol Mark Yee, YouthWorks PH chief of party, said the partnerships show that the academe and industries can work together in developing the country's workforce.

"Improving the state of our education is a task that is no longer exclusive to government and academic institutions, and workforce development is not the sole responsibility of the business sector," he added. The project will begin its recruitment drives in April nationwide, starting with Cagayan de Oro City.

There will be outreach programs and career caravans in the Greater Manila Area, Zamboanga City, Cebu, Iloilo, Gen. Santos City, and Davao City.

"YouthWorks PH will improve access for youth to training and employment opportunities, and engage the private sector in workforce development. Our partnership will create over 4,000 work-based training positions for youth and these positions will be complemented with classroom-based skills training and competency certification," USAID Deputy Mission Director Patrick Wesner said. (PNA)