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MANILA -- Two Filipino seafarers were killed in Mexico after the bar they were in was set on fire, reportedly by gang members, on August 27, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) reported on Friday.

Philippine Ambassador to Mexico Demetrio Tuazon reported that 26 others were killed during the incident in the Port of Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, Mexico.

State Governor of Veracruz Cuitlahuac Garcia released a statement on social media, saying the arson was the result of a dispute

between rival gangs in the area.

The DFA said the embassy is now in touch with authorities and the Filipino seafarers' manning agency for the repatriation of their remains.

"The DFA extends its condolences to the families of the Filipino seafarers, and the embassy stands ready to provide further assistance if

needed," it said in a bulletin sent through Assistant Secretary Emmanuel Fernandez.

According to reports, the fire was started with gasoline bombs.

The incident happened almost eight years since the Casino Royale in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico was also set ablaze, during which, 52 persons were killed. (PNA)

DA chief accepts challenges, pressures facing PH agriculture

MANILA -- With less than a month into office, Agriculture Secretary William Dar said he accepts the challenges and pressures faced by the country's agriculture sector, promising to fully discharge the "new thinking" approach to address them and transform farmers and fishers into prosperous agripreneurs.

Working hand-in-hand with the private sector, Dar has been pushing for inclusive growth for all sectors involved in food production and rural development.

"Maraming problema, maraming challenges, pero di tayo susuko (There are many problems and challenges but we will not give up)," he said in a forum held in Candon City, Ilocos Sur on Wednesday.

During his visit, Dar also assured farmers in Candon

and nearby municipalities of readily available government assistance.

He said the DA needs to get a good hand on various big issues in the next four months, among them the falling prices of palay and copra, and the swine disease that has yet to be confirmed by laboratory tests.

"Kaya natin ito kung tayong lahat ay nagkakaisa (We can do this if we are united). We will bring all the minds and the best ideas into the table and really harness the best measures possible to help the sector," the DA chief said.

"Lahat ay gagawin namin para maibsan ang paghihirap ng mga farmers (We will do everything to ease the burden of farmers)," he added. (PNA)

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MARINA starts phase out of wooden-hull bancas

MANILA – The Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA) on Friday announced it has stopped the registration of new wooden-hull passenger bancas starting two weeks ago in support of the DOTr's modernization plans for a safer maritime public transport industry.

MARINA officer-in-charge, Vice-Admiral Narciso Vingson made the move to phase out wooden-hull passenger bancas in compliance with a DOTr department order in 2016.

"Kasi kapag di namin ini-stop, tuloy-tuloy pa rin ang paggawa ng wooden hull (Because of we don't stop their registration, wooden-hull bancas will continue to be built)," Vingson said in an ambush interview after the Maritime Safety Summit for Domestic Shipping in a hotel in Manila.

Registered wooden-hull bancas will not be renewed either and only boats with hulls made of fiberglass or steel will be allowed.

"Existing wooden-hull boats with registration have an expiration of five years and after that, we will not be renewing [them]," Vingson said.

To soften the blow of the planned phaseout, which will affect 80 percent of about 7,000 registered passenger ships, he said MARINA will emulate the Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program of the DOTr through the creation of maritime transport cooperatives and provision of financial support.

"They can form a cooperative because a single owner cannot afford a fiberglass ship which costs around PHP5 million to PHP8 million," Vingson said.

DOTr Secretary Arthur Tugade said the DOTr's phaseout plan for wooden-hull bancas, which started in 2016, needs stricter enforcement to prevent maritime tragedies.

"Actually po, may department order na yan, at on the basis of the department order, which was issued 2016, ngayon, humihingi ako ng todo-todong tulak (Actually, there's already a department order issued on 2016. And on the basis of that order, I am asking for stricter enforcement)," Tugade said in a press conference following the summit.

The DOTr chief said they are eyeing to replace the bancas with Roll-on/Roll-off (RoRo) vessels or fast crafts as these are safer and have larger seat capacities.

"Initially sinabi ko po diyan yung RoRo. Eto po, mas stable, mas secure, mas safe (Initially, I said it would be RoRos. These are more stable, more secure, safer)," Tugade said.

However, he said ports nationwide must first be able to accommodate these larger vessels, which the DOTr is initiating with the Philippine Ports Authority (PPA).

"Titignan po ninyo yung tinatawag na depth, at titignan yung approaches. Yun po ang ginagawa namin in close coordination with PPA (We should look at the depth and approaches. We have started doing this in close coordination with PPA)," Tugade said.

When asked whether the phaseout of wooden-hull bancas would include tourist boats in places such as Palawan, he said passenger safety must always be considered first and that safer vessels such as RoRos can be retrofitted to serve as tourist boats.

"Kailangan i-balanse po natin yan. Kasi pwede ka naman magkaroon ng RoRo na ang outer ay bangka. Ang importante ay ang kaligtasan ng mananakay (We need to balance this. Because we could have a RoRo with an outward appearance of a banca. What's important is the safety of the passengers)," Tugade said.

To address overloading in passenger vessels which is also a concern in preventing sea mishaps, PPA general manager Jay Daniel Santiago said they are set to implement an electronic ticketing system before the end of the year.

Called the "one ticketing system," the online service will comply with the Duterte administration's ease of doing business campaign through faster processing and the ridding of fixers and scalpers.

During the press conference, Santiago also announced plans of the PPA to build a PHP300 million shipbuilding facility by next year to bolster the country's shipping industry and encourage maritime travel across the nation's archipelago. (PNA)

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and He will flee from you.” – James 4:7