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PH rice sufficiency unlikely in 10 years – UA&P

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by Ritchie A. Horario

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The country is unlikely to achieve rice sufficiency within the next 10 years because of its disadvantageous geographical conditions, the economist that heads research at the University of Asia and the Pacific (UA&P) said.

Bernardo Villegas, head of the Center for Research and Communication of the UA&P, explained that although the Philippines is an archipelago, the country still lacks big lakes and rivers that could supply water for irrigation systems to spur increased rice production.

"The Philippines cannot supply enough water for its agricultural land because unlike Vietnam and Thailand, we don't have big rivers," Villegas told participants in the Asia CEO Forum held in Makati city on Friday.

Because of this, the Philippines would still import at least 40 percent of its rice requirements for the succeeding years from neighboring countries such as Vietnam and Thailand, he said.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Foreign Agricultural Service earlier reported that the Philippines is the world's biggest rice importer, purchasing between 1 million to 2 million metric tons of rice each year mainly from Thailand and Vietnam.

In 2013, the state-run National Food Authority imported P4.35 billion worth of rice.

Billions saved

Conversely, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said that the country saved an estimated P147 billion from 2010 to 2013 by buying more locally grown palay instead of importing rice.

In a statement, DA Secretary Proceso Alcala said that instead of buying rice from Vietnam and Thailand, the government decided not to import as much as it did in 2010 because Filipino farmers saw a good harvest during the subsequent years.

In 2013, the country registered its highest rice production output at 18.44 million metric tons (MT), which translates to 96 percent rice self-sufficiency.

Alcala said that he expects the trend to continue and even speed up, as the first quarter report on Rice and Corn Situation and Outlook forecasts that production from January-September 2014 may rise from 11.36 million MT in 2013 to 11.82 million MT this year.

Failed land reform

Meanwhile, Villegas said agri-business in the country is unsuccessful because of the failure of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP).

"The CARP failed not because of fragmentation as what was claimed by landlords, but because of the government's lack of support to the farmers," he added.

He added that after awarding land for agricultural use, the government did not help farmers to sustain it by providing farm to market roads and irrigation systems.

"The government did not follow through. Farmers were not supported by the government to make their two-hectare land more productive," he said.

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He said what the government should focused on for the next 10 years is to do what it should have done for the last 20 years—improving and putting up infrastructures in the countryside.

He also urged the government to consider adopting the Malaysian and Indonesian model in attaining high value plantation crops.

Under the model, he explained, large companies with processing plants are working in tandem with smaller stakeholders to facilitate technology transfer.

The large companies then purchase the agricultural products of these smaller farmers.

“We could introduce this model to farmers of palm oil, rubber and cacao,” he said.

Villegas also said that for the next 20 years the biggest challenge of the world is food and water thus, the government should exert effort to attain food security.

The Asia CEO Forum is the largest regular business event in the Philippines, aiming to promote the country as a premier business destination to global decision makers.

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Fara Gonzales says:

June 17, 2014 at 9:13 am

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