

NFA hit for 'artificial' rice shortage

By RHODINA VILLANUEVA

A watch group yesterday considered the removal of the P27 National Food Authority (NFA) rice from the market and raising its price as a declaration of war against the poor.

Bantay Bigas spokesperson Cathy Estavillo was reacting to a statement made by NFA director Rex Estoperez in a recent interview, where he said the large price gap between NFA rice and commercial rice "traumatized" the agency's buffer stock.

"NFA's limited buffer stock is due to the agency's failure to uphold its mandate. Instead of procuring 10 percent of the total local rice production, it only acquires one to two percent, sometimes even lower just like in 2016 where it only purchased 0.6 percent of local production," Estavillo claimed.

She lamented that while "it is the NFA's mandate to ensure national food security and stabilize supply and prices of staple cereals both in the farm and consumer levels," it is instead considering hiking prices.

"Selling NFA rice at P32 per kilo is equivalent to a 20-percent price increase. Why is the NFA putting the burden

of its failure on impoverished Filipinos?"

The group said President Duterte is accountable for his Cabinet officials' absurd solutions to the country's chronic problems, which make poor Filipinos' life even harder.

The group vowed to oppose anti-people policies that would hinder the attainment of sufficient, safe and affordable rice. They reiterated the call to address the problems affecting the local rice industry to ensure the country's food security through increased local rice procurement at higher purchasing price, free land distribution and provision of support services to boost rice production and to put an end to importation.

As this developed, the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP) said it would lead nationally coordinated actions and protests on Friday at the NFA regional offices and warehouses in major provinces nationwide to protest what it called an ongoing artificial rice shortage, massive rice importation and rice smuggling tolerated by the NFA.

"The NFA's inability to address the national rice problem is unacceptable. Hunger incidence and malnutrition among

children would increase and we could only blame the NFA for this," said KMP spokesman Antonio Flores.

Meanwhile, the NFA in Batanes assured the public that there was no reason for them to panic amid reports of rice shortage.

"As of Feb. 14, we still have 11,702 bags that will last for the next 124 days," said NFA Batanes manager Philip Cezar Rumbaoa.

He added that 70 percent of Ivatans who depend on NFA rice must not fear the possibility of shortage as "the lessons of the past have been imbibed in us," like stocking up on the staple before the typhoon months, calibrating distribution of supply when it runs low.

According to a study, 30 percent of Ivatans now eat only commercial rice.

In Ipil, Zamboanga Sibugay, the provincial government strengthened its programs to address rice shortage as well as increase food production. It funneled an initial P65 million to fishery and agriculture projects to avoid dependence on imports.

The province supplies rice to Zamboanga City, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. — With Jack Castano, Roel Pareño

* national food authority (NFA)