

Privilege Speech
15th Regular Council Session
April 15, 2008

RICE CRISIS . . . THE REAL PICTURE

By Councilor Pilar C. Braga, PhD

Madam President, I speak on a continuing concern which we have initially surfaced in the last two last council session.

The growing lines of the urban poor seeking their daily ration of rice at any NFA station throughout the country are images replete with political meaning. There is great danger looming ahead. For nothing illustrates more sharply a crisis spanning out of control than angry people queuing and scrambling for food.

The Arroyo government is aware of this and is adopting quick fix measures to avert an imminent disaster - scouring the cereal markets of the world for available rice and wheat at any price; threatening rice hoarders who may be hoarding rice with instant imprisonment; and even enlisting the help of the religious sector, particularly the Catholic Church, to distribute the vanishing commodity.

Past instances of rice scarcity were mainly caused by abnormal weather or crop infestation and rice importation then was just a contingency measure. Today, rice imports have become a permanent fixture of our food situation. As a result, we have become more vulnerable than ever to the instabilities of the global food market.

The present rice crisis has its origins in global demand and supply that are beyond our control. Food prices are going up everywhere simultaneous with the phenomenal rise in the price of petroleum products. Very sadly, there is very little that a small nation like ours can do to reverse this situation.

But we can do something to shield ourselves from the worst effects of what appears to be a long-term global food crisis. We can start growing our basic food requirements all over again. Our country is blessed with abundant agricultural lands, although for the most part agricultural leaders treat these merely as vacant spaces.

It would require tremendous will on the part of our national leadership to accomplish this. Our country in the past has a thriving agricultural economy but we threw it away in exchange for the short-term gains of a service economy based primarily on the earnings of exported workers.

It is not an exaggeration to say that over the last three decades our leaders have by their routine issues and directives, discouraged Filipinos from pursuing agriculture as a way of life. As a result farming schools and colleges of agriculture that once flourished all over the countries have closed down or have realigned their courses away from farming in order to survive.

We have launched an agrarian reform program shot through with loopholes, we forced landowners to stop planting while waiting to effect the reclassification or conversion of their property to non-agriculture use. By not giving them support services, we forced small farmers and land reform beneficiaries to sell their farms and use the money to get overseas work. By importing rice in large quantities in order to assume steady supply at regulated prices, we made it difficult for local rice growers to sell at prices that would allow them to recover their costs.

By these amazing acts, we have failed to see what the widening patches of idle farm lands all over the country are telling us. We have not noticed the overnight sprouting of housing projects on what used to be fertile irrigated farm lands. The easy availability of cheap imported rice has concealed from the general public the crisis of local agriculture.

Yes, Mr. Lorenzo Camayong, NFA Regional Manager was closer to the truth than he realized when he said when he was here last Tuesday, "There is no rice shortage." I agree with him. There is no rice shortage in the country. What we have is a rice-land shortage.

Allow me at the proper time, Madam President, to pass resolution regarding this concern.

Thank you.

PILAR C. BRAGA, PHD
City Councilor

April 15, 2008