

# GMA OKs P1.68-B subsidy for farmers

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo has approved the allocation of P1.68 billion as a subsidy to the farming sector for the acquisition and distribution of certified palay seeds nationwide.

Agriculture Secretary Arthur Yap said yesterday the amount will be used to buy some 1.4 million sacks of certified seeds to be planted in 1.4 million hectares of irrigated and rain-fed rice lands all over the country during the cropping season for this year and in 2009.

The Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP) will also provide P7 billion in micro-finance loans which farmer-beneficiaries could use to improve rice and crop production, he said.

Yap joined the President for the launching of the National Seed Program in Flora, Apayao yesterday morning.

Each sack of certified palay seeds under the subsidy program can generate up to 120 sacks of palay or 60 sacks of milled rice.

The agriculture chief said aside from the subsidy, the Department of Agriculture (DA) has intensified its collaboration with the International Rice Research Institute on the development of rice varieties that will perform better than the ones now being propagated and grown by Filipino farmers.

"These new, high-yielding varieties thrive in less than-optimal production environments such as the nearly 30,000 hectares of drought-prone and un-irrigated rice fields in the province of Apayao and Cagayan and about 5,000 hectares of saline and salt water intrusion-prone fields in the coastal municipalities of Aparri, Bagguio, Sta. Teresita, Balawitan, Abulog, and Pamplona," a Palace statement said.

Yap said in compliance with Mrs. Arroyo's directive, the DA has also come up with production incentives for farmers who sell their produce to the National Food Authority (NFA).

Under the incentives program, farmers who can supply 50 sacks or up to 500,000 metric tons of rice to the NFA will be given P1,000 (per 50 sacks) as rebate, which the farmers can use to buy fertilizers and other farm needs.

"The President has ordered that we give P1,000

production support (per 50 sacks) for the dry crops because the price of fertilizers has gone up considerably," Yap said.

The funding will be sourced from revenue collections, particularly the value-added tax, he said.

He said P7 billion would be given to the Land Bank so it can lend to irrigators' associations, seed growers, and farmer-beneficiaries to help them in planting and harvesting next year.

The subsidies are part of the DA's mission of helping the country attain rice self-sufficiency by 2010, he said.

## 'Walk the talk'

Meanwhile, a senior militant lawmaker said President Arroyo should "walk the talk" on his promise that she wants the Philippines to be self-sufficient in rice and no longer rely on imports for Filipinos' staple food.

Bayan Muna Rep. Sinar Ocampo, former spokesman for the communist party's National Democratic Front, also called on Mrs. Arroyo, who made the promise during her State of the Nation Address, to certify as "urgent" a comprehensive rice industry development bill.

Ocampo, accompanied by Reps. Teddy Casiño, Lisa Maza and Luc Bagan of Gabriela, delivered a "counter-SONA" Wednesday attacking the government's "lack of modern agricultural base."

The opposition lawmaker also suggested to the administration to refrain from "promoting her stop-gap and short-sighted programs, and work instead for lasting solutions that focus on strengthening our own rice industry."

"We need concrete and double measures that will aid in addressing the rice crisis," he said.

House Bill 3958 or the Rice Industry Development Act, authored by Ocampo, seeks to turn the Philippines into a self-reliant and self-sufficient rice producer in the next three years.

The bill aims to create a policy environment of strong state intervention that will institutionalize five core programs and nourish the development and protection of the rice industry.

- With Delon Pascualia