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Agricultural Situation

National Food Security Congress

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Report Highlights:

The Department of Agriculture hosted a National Food Security Congress on August 19 to reemphasize agriculture and poverty alleviation as the top political agenda of the Estrada Administration. Participants included provincial governors and local government executives, state university and college presidents, Department of Agriculture officials and attached agency heads, and business and private sector representatives.

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Last August 19, a National Food Security Congress (Congress) was held aimed at initiating a strategy of improving food security by the strengthening of collaboration of the Department of Agriculture (DA) with local government units (LGU's) and the State Universities and Colleges (SUC's). The Congress was well attended by provincial governors and local executives, DA officers and directors, the academe, non governmental and peoples organizations, as well as business and private sector representatives.

The Congress had for its aims the following:

- 1.) Define the policy agenda of the Estrada administration on agriculture and food security as the main focus;
- 2.) Present the current state of the country's food security within a national and international perspective;
- 3.) Identify strategic issues and draw up recommendations in improving food security and self-sufficiency at the local level;
- 4.) Map out partnership mechanisms and action agenda among DA, LGU's, SUC's, farmer/fisherfolk groups, and the private sector in implementing local food security programs.

Senator Edgardo Angara, author of the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act of 1997 (AFMA), spoke on the importance of the "humanistic" side of AFMA and its role in uplifting the welfare of farmers and fisherfolks. Senator Angara is believed to be the next Agriculture Secretary after a year or sometime middle of 1999. The AFMA seeks to modernize Philippine agriculture and fisheries through the establishment of Strategic Agricultural and Fisheries Development Zones (SAFDZ) of which individual development plans will be based upon. The lead agency in implementing the AFMA will be the local government with the DA as lead-support agency. The AFMA entails the appropriation of P120 Billion (\$3 Billion at P40/\$) over the next 7 years of which 30 percent is allocated for irrigation.

Acting DA Secretary William Dar gave a description of the current state of Philippine agriculture stating that agriculture had contracted by 7.15% in the first six months of 1998 largely due to the El Nino drought. Dar also mentioned that during the past 3 years, the country was 93 to 95 percent self-sufficient in rice; 80 to 83 percent self-sufficient in corn, 92-98 percent self-sufficient in chicken; and 72 to 77 percent self-sufficient in eggs. Dar added that for root crops, beef, and carabeef (buffalo meat), there was relatively self-sufficiency only because per capita consumption was very low compared to the neighboring ASEAN countries. Furthermore, Dar pointed out, although the country was slightly self-sufficient in fish, prices have become prohibitive.

After opening remarks from several speakers, the participants were divided into seven clusters tasked to draw up an action plan on DA-SUC-LGU partnership to improve food security in their respective areas. The Congress culminated with the signing of a Memorandum of Partnership for Food Security and Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization among the DA, Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), LGU and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). President Estrada was unable to attend the Congress, however, due to inclement weather.