

Long lines for rice not the first time in RP history

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MANILA, Philippines - The queues were like for a blockbuster movie — only that these were on the roadsides of Quezon City and Metro Manila where hundreds of people were not spectators, but actors in a true-to-life drama. The long lines of mostly poor people for rice were not the first time though in the country's history. "Lines like these happened way back in the early 70s during Marcos time, when I myself lined up for rice at gas stations, and in the time of Secretary Sebastian in the 90s," recalled Jose D. Cordero, regional director of the National Food Authority (NFA) in the National Capital Region. Cordero was referring to the 1972 and 1995 rice crises in the Philippines. The long lines in the 70s happened after poor weather, pest infestation of rice paddies, and flooding in Central Luzon reduced local rice output to 17 percent, prompting then President Ferdinand Marcos to create in 1972 the NFA through Presidential Decree No. 4. To address the crisis, the government increased rice importation in 1972 to 455,000 tons from 10 tons in 1968. Heavy importation continued from 1973 to 1975, until it decreased to 55,000 tons in 1976, 30,000 tons in 1977, and finally to a no-import year in 1978. In 1995, hundreds of people also queued for imported rice sold at government-subsidized prices. Each person was allowed to buy only up to three kilograms of the staple at *Bigasang Bayan*

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outlets. Commercial rice cost between P21 to 28 per kilogram. The NFA sold the staple for P10.25 per kg. The 1995 crisis stemmed from poor government planning. Amid the rising prices of commercial rice, then President Fidel Ramos followed the recommendation of then Agriculture Secretary Roberto Sebastian to only import some 263,000 metric tons of rice (MT), but the NFA's recommendation was to procure 700,000 MT. The NFA was also blamed for its failure to guarantee adequate supply of the staple. But then NFA administrator Romeo David argued that the agency was not able to buy enough rice supplies, because it could not compete with traders and private millers who offered higher prices to farmers. After the "miscalculated" import, the Ramos administration, like the Marcos administration, addressed the crisis through a series of heavy importation from the global market, which at the time still had plenty of supplies. Thus from a mere 207 MT of rice imports in 1994, importation climbed to 849,000 in MT in 1996, 722,000 MT in 1997, and finally 2.17 million MT in 1998. After 13 years, a rice crisis has again struck the Philippines. But unlike the previous ones, this year's pandemic was not primarily triggered by an internal episode, but by a confluence of external events — the continuous increase of oil prices, the conversion of rice lands into biofuel farms, the increasing demand for the staple by major rice producers in Asia that prompted them to curb exports, and unfavorable weather conditions worsened by global warming. Because the Philippines is heavily dependent on imported rice, these external events distressed the country. The soaring prices of the staple commercially sold at P30 to P50 per kg further weakened the purchasing power of the already food-poor Filipinos. What complicates the present rice problem in the Philippines is the tightness in the global supply of rice. During the Marcos and Ramos administrations, major rice producing countries like Vietnam, China, and India had not yet decided to curb exports. "Though we could still import from these countries, the fear remains that they may suddenly decide to decrease exports or totally stop supplying our needs. *May perang pambili, pero baka hindi makabili kasi walang* assurance from the sources (There's money to buy rice, but we may not be able to buy because we don't have assurance from the sources)," said an economist from the NFA. "That's the major source of insecurity, which we didn't encounter in the past administrations" the economist added. - GMA News.TV