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Philippines Facing Rice Famine

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MANILA, Aug. 9 — “‘The Philippines’ top basketball stars eat corn grits. Former world lightweight boxing champ Flash Elorde and popular songstress Pilita Corrales also like the cereal.”

The slogans are hammered home over radio and television, in print and at seminars as the Philippine Government finally tells the public that rice stocks are almost gone and that unless they are mixed with corn grits, there will be no staple food left.

For months government information offices kept a tight lid on the shortage, although its causes were understandable enough — insurrection in the south, disastrous floods in mid-1972 and a 10-month drought after.

As late as two weeks ago, when commercial rice stocks ran out, the Government assured the people it had enough stockpiles. On the eve of the closely controlled referendum of July 27 and 28, President Ferdinand E. Marcos gave a well-publicized order to the National Grains Authority: “Flood the markets with rice.”

White Rice Disappears

The referendum results that gave the Filipino strongman a 91 per cent majority to remain in office beyond 1973 were just coming in when the white rice grains disappeared from the

markets.

To the Filipino who eats two or more cups of rice at every meal and who can ill afford to satisfy his hunger with meat instead, the lack of rice has mind-shattering implications.

For the past week in Manila and, it is reported, in communities in the provinces, block-long double lines of people wait before guarded government trucks as rice is rationed out.

It was raining yesterday when the government rice truck arrived at the city hall grounds in Quezon. More than 100 people were already waiting. Pureza Golane, 46 years old, of Barrio Pagasa — the name means hope—stood in line with one of her six small children. “I was not able to wash this afternoon because I came here,” she said, referring to the laundry she takes in for neighbors to earn a dollar a day.

The scene was reminiscent of wartime 1942 when retreating Filipino — American troops were hotly pursued by Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita's forces and the disorder slowed rice production.

All That's Available

Tomorrow Pureza Golane and others like her will line up again for their day's rice supply, but they will get instead a mix of rice and corn grits, an unpopular food in most of the country. Yet, until October, it will be the only kind available.

The corn grits were brought in hurriedly from the southern islands, where an unexpected, bumper crop was harvested. There was no such luck with the rice crop.

“The yellow-husked grains turned out to be empty,” said Felicidad de Joya, 48, a ricefield owner from nearby Batangas Province. “They were starved for water.”

Normally the paddies in Batangas soak in water a foot deep for the first month of the rice-growing season and the sturdy seedlings are a fresh yellow-green. But the rains did not come last year. Irrigation wells ran dry.

Before that there was too much water. In central Luzon, where floods ravaged seven provinces, 20 per cent of rice and other crops was washed away.

In southern Mindanao, rice stalks either withered from lack of water or, when they managed to grow, were neglected because of the continuing Moslem insurgency. Figures released by the presidential office showed that as much as 18 per cent of this crop was lost.

Yet this now rice-starved country was the starting point of Asia's rice revolution. The first high-yield varieties were grown in rich Laguna Province by the International Rice Research Institute.

Up till 1970, the dream of abundant rice seemed realizable. The country actually exported rice that year. But high costs have

slowed scientific production and the population growth of 3 per cent has kept up with the surplus.

A nationwide campaign to grow more rice, using the latest techniques, started in June, funded in part by the United States Agency for International Development. Farmers have been allowed easy loans.

Some Shipments Awaited

Another program, in which the first lady, Mrs. Imelda Marcos, is working with provincial governors and town mayors, seeks to open virgin lands for cultivation.

The programs of international agencies have focused on irrigation and production. Five projects of the Asian Development Bank are intended to bring irrigation to more than 230,000 acres of rice and corn land here.

These efforts, barring new calamities, will bring a rice harvest in two months. Meantime, what will people eat?

A few rice shipments are still expected: from Japan, 95,000 tons, from China, 50,000, from Taiwan, 20,000 and from Thailand, 14,000. Other traditional suppliers, such as Pakistan and the United States, have run out of rice to sell.

The cereal agency announced there were enough corn grits to stretch the rice supply till October. It also urged the public to switch to bread or macaroni, for these can be made from

American wheat expected soon.

This will require a radical change in eating habits and could be costly as it calls for more protein foods. The prospect looms that many may not have anything to eat at all.

With panic in the air, hoarding began this week, not of rice alone but also of other basic commodities. Such goods as sugar and vegetable oil disappeared from store shelves.

Today the Philippine Constabulary sent inspectors to warehouses and stores around the country to seize hoarded stocks.

Show no mercy to profiteers and hoarders, President Marcos told them. Earlier he called upon the people to sacrifice. "We must now eat what we have," he said. "We must bear the burden of nationhood otherwise we will not be fit to be independent and free."