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Headline: Groups decry zero mention of reclamation in Bongbong Marcos' 2nd Sona

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MANILA, Philippines—The absence of any mention in President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr’s second State of the Nation address (Sona) of reclamation projects has left groups dismayed.

Despite continuous calls from climate advocates, environmentalists, marine scientists, and fisherfolk groups to stop destructive reclamation projects in Manila Bay and other parts of the country, there was no mention of the issue in Marcos Jr.’s second Sona delivered on Monday, July 24.

While the President noted the country’s climate change mitigation strategies, several groups and organizations slammed Marcos Jr. for “very little attention given to pressing climate crisis,” including environmental issues such as ongoing reclamation projects.

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“Climate agenda? But no word on stopping disastrous mining, reclamation, logging, other oligarchic and foreign companies’ businesses,” think tank Ibon Foundation said in a tweet.

The Mindanao chapter of Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines (Yacap)—an alliance of youth organizations, individuals, and student councils that advocates immediate global climate action—also stressed the administration’s lack of urgency in aiding communities directly affected by the climate crisis.

“There was no mention of the reclamation projects throughout the country that not only pose environmental risks but also entail significant social, economic, and cultural losses to the communities that will be affected,” said Yacap Mindanao.

“After one year into the Marcos administration, there is a lack of urgency in providing solutions to the marginalized communities who bear the brunt of the impacts of the climate crisis,” the group added.

There was also no mention of the reclamation projects in Marcos Jr.’s first Sona last year.

GRAPHIC Ed Lustan

For Mark David de Guzman, founder of the environmental conservation organization One Pawikan, the non-mention of issues like reclamation projects in this year’s Sona reflects the President’s lack of prioritization on the environment sector.

“It is obvious in his Sona that the environment sector is not his priority,” said De Guzman in Filipino.

"There is no mention of the moratorium on reclamation [projects]. It's as if it is not a crucial issue [that impacts] the environment and the fisherfolk. Dredging companies continue to abuse our coastal areas, which is also the reason our fisherfolk are losing their livelihood," he added.

Ahead of the President's second Sona, a fisherfolk group and a peasant women's group gave Marcos Jr. a "failing grade" over the administration's supposed lack of action on reclamation in Manila Bay.

"We know our situation very well because we are the ones on the ground. Our grade for President Bongbong Marcos is a failing one," said Ronnel Arambulo, vice chairman of militant fisherfolk group Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas (Pamalakaya), in an interview.

"Our fisherfolk are being choked by the shrinking fishing space caused by unrighteous and inhumane [...] reclamation projects that destroy the coastal area and communities [in Manila Bay]," Zenaida Soriano, chairperson of Amihan, said in Filipino.

Data from the Philippine Reclamation Authority showed that 22 reclamation projects in Manila Bay are at various stages of development. Half of these have already been issued permits.

GRAPHIC Ed Lustan

The New Manila International Airport in Bulacan, which various environmental and conservation groups have strongly criticized due to its negative environmental impact, may be partly operational by the end of Marcos Jr.'s administration.

In a television interview hours before the president delivered his second Sona, Transport Secretary Jaime Bautista said San Miguel Corp.'s (SMC) Bulacan airport is about 70 to 75 percent complete.

However, according to the Advocates of Science and Technology for the People (Agham), the airport, which is expected to help decongest Ninoy Aquino International Airport (Naia), had already caused environmental damage even before it was issued an environmental compliance certificate (ECC).

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"The environmental compliance certificate (ECC) for this project was issued by the [Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR)] in 2021, but even before that, mangrove trees were cut down and fisherfolk displaced from their communities in Bulacan since 2018," the group said.

"Additionally, the sand being dumped in Bulacan was dredged from the seabed in coastal waters in Cavite, thus also affecting ecosystems and livelihood of fisherfolk. It was only in 2023 when DENR started to look into the cumulative impacts of reclamation in Manila Bay," it added.

Late last month, the DENR said it is monitoring the compliance of reclamation projects in Manila Bay. The agency said it is looking into possible violations of a party involved in the reclamation.

In a Palace briefing, Environment Secretary Maria Antonia Yulo Loyzaga said that the DENR had been conducting a "cumulative impact assessment" of the various reclamation projects in Manila Bay.

While groups welcomed the agency's "rare initiative" to monitor compliance with reclamation rules in Manila Bay, they stressed that it is long overdue as various reclamation projects have already inflicted "irreversible damage" to marine ecosystems and the livelihood of coastal people.

The People's Network for the Integrity of Coastal Habitats and Ecosystems (People's NICHE), an alliance of marine and coastal protection advocates, meanwhile urged the agency to impose a moratorium and put all reclamation projects on hold to prevent any further harm from taking place.

"We, therefore, declare a moratorium on such projects until at least this cumulative assessment is completed. In addition to this, we urge the DENR to formally involve community and civil society organizations in assessing the impacts of reclamation projects," the alliance said.

GRAPHIC Ed Lustan

Various environmental and fisherfolk groups have repeatedly called on the government to unconditionally revoke all environmental compliance certificates for all 22 reclamation projects in Manila Bay on environmental and socio-economic grounds.

According to Agham, People's NICHE had already requested a moratorium on ongoing reclamation projects in a dialogue with the DENR last April.

However, the dumping of soil on the coasts of Manila Bay and extraction of sand from the seabed in the municipal waters of Cavite persisted two months after the dialogue.

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"Manila Bay is dying; the fishing families that rely on it are starving," said Pamalakaya.

The group said the DENR was taking its "sweet time in making a verdict against destructive reclamation projects that are already ravaging marine ecosystems and fishing communities."

"It has been long proven by many scientists and experts that reclamation is a disaster to the marine environment and fishing communities," the group added.

It said the National Fisheries and Development Institute had already found that fish eggs and larvae teem in areas being hit by reclamation projects.

As of July 25, the DENR has yet to issue a moratorium on ongoing reclamation projects in Manila Bay and other parts of the country.

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