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RESUME

National

- **[Southeast Asia's biggest solar farm inaugurated in Negros Occidental](#)**

A 132.5-megawatt solar farm in Cadiz City, Negros Occidental was inaugurated last March 3 in the presence of Negros Occidental Governor Alfredo Marañon and French Ambassador Thierry Mathou. The P10-billion solar farm, which was developed through a partnership between Gregorio Araneta Incorporated and Soleq Holdings Incorporated, is considered the largest in Southeast Asia and the 7th largest in the world.

- **[Labor groups demand uniform minimum wage nationwide](#)**

Labor groups, led by socialist congressman Walden Bello, submitted a petition to the Supreme Court to stop the implementation of the Wage Rationalization Act that sets different regional minimum wages in the country. According to the groups, this legislation sets different minimum wages nationwide with the highest at P481 in the National Capital Region (NCR) and as low as P250 in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which deprives over 62 million Filipino workers of decent wages and encourages labor discrimination.

- **[Business sector concerned over power crisis in Mindanao](#)**

Businessmen, particularly in the agriculture, mining and food sectors, have raised serious concerns over the continuous power outages in Mindanao. These power outages have been attributed to the decrease in the capacity of the region's hydro power plants due to the dry spell, as well as the bombing of transmission lines and temporary closure of coal fired power plants.

International

- **[Increased violence in Mindanao attributed to IS](#)**

According to analysts, militants who have pledged their allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) group are escalating attacks in Mindanao and are increasing their influence in the region, especially after the government had failed to pass the Bangsamoro Basic Law with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. This argument follows the assassination attempt on a Saudi Arabian preacher, who is on the hit list of the IS, which took place this week in Zamboanga. The military is currently fighting a group allegedly allied with IS in the province of Lanao del Sur, which has led to the displacement of over 30,000 persons and the deaths of 6 soldiers. Analysts have also suggested that the allegiance of these local groups to the IS were not influenced mainly by ideology, but the money and resources that the IS can offer them.

SOUTHEAST ASIA'S BIGGEST SOLAR FARM OPENS IN NEGROS OCCIDENTAL MARCHEL P. ESPINA, RAPPLER.COM

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NEGROS OCCIDENTAL, Philippines – The 132.5-megawatt solar farm in Cadiz City opened Thursday, March 3.

The P10-billion solar farm, located in Hacienda Paz, Barangay Tinampaan, was developed through a partnership between Gregorio Araneta Incorporated (GAI) and Soleq Holdings Incorporated on the solar generation facility of Helios Solar Energy Corporation.

It is considered to be the biggest in Southeast Asia and 7th largest in the world.

The Cadiz solar farm brings to 10 the total number of fully functional solar power plants in the Philippines. They have a combined installed capacity of 377 MW, said former Senator Juan Miguel Zubiri, who authored the Renewable Energy Law of 2008.

Zubiri attended the opening of the solar farm.

Governor Alfredo Marañon Jr said the province now has a power production capacity of 280-MW, adding that it would attract more investors.

He said it would address the power shortage problem in Negros Occidental.

Solar farms use panels that are designed to absorb the rays of the sun then convert them into electricity.

Cadiz Mayor Patrick Escalante said that the solar project is seen to generate P45 million worth of annual revenues for the local government. He added that it is expected to increase the annual revenues of the city by about P100 million.

The solar farm has started connecting to the grid on February 13, and is initially supplying an average of 30-MW through the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines.

“Today, the farm’s efficiency rate is 80% amid the stormy weather. Since it started operating fully within almost 3 weeks already, it supplies huge part of the province’s average power demand of 200 MW,” Escalante said.

Gregorio Araneta III, chairman of Helios and owner of GAI, said the “ideally-located P200-million solar farm in Cadiz” is one of his renewable energy projects in the country. Others were in Leyte and Ilocos.

He added: “This project also demonstrates our country’s ability to develop world-class renewable energy projects and establishes the Philippines’ foothold as frontrunner in renewable energy.”

Joining Araneta in the inauguration rites were his wife Irene Marcos, the youngest daughter of the late President Ferdinand Marcos; French Ambassador to the Philippines and Micronesia Thierry Mathou; former Senator Zubiri; and other public officials.

In a statement, Zubiri said additional solar farms are now being put up in Bacolod City, La Carlota City, and in the municipalities of Murcia and Manapla in Negros Occidental and Mabinay in Negros Oriental.

“Without question, Negros Island is now the solar power capital of the Philippines and the whole of Southeast Asia, considering the number of solar farms either already up and running or set to operate here,” he said.

Zubiri said more than 2.9 million jobs – mostly in construction and engineering services – have been created by the boom in solar, wind, geothermal, hydro and biomass power projects in the provinces.

The solar farm in Cadiz, for instance, was built by more than 2,500 workers, according to Mayor Escalante. It employs a regular staff of 200. – **Rappler.com**

MINDANAO POWER SUPPLY WOES ALARM TRADERS, CONSUMERS

by [Mike Crismundo](#)

March 3, 2016

San Francisco, Agusan del Sur – Businessmen, particularly in the agriculture, mining and food sectors have raised serious concerns over the continuous brownouts in Mindanao.

The business group and other sectors, including the consuming public are very much worried following the decrease in the island's hydro power plants' capacity to 16% due to El Niño, frequent emergency shutdowns of some power plant assets and the bombing of power transmission lines.

Adding to the woes of the business sector and consumers is the preventive maintenance shut down of some coal fired power plants.

In a statement, Romeo Montenegro, communications director of the Mindanao Development Authority urged power users to conserve energy even if there are energy reserves.

On Wednesday, the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines (NGCP) informed electric cooperatives that one of the units of the Therma South, Inc.(TSI) 150-megawatt (MW) coal-fired power plant in Toril, Davao City went offline.

The NGCP Tower #63 of Kabacan-Sultan Kudarat 138 kV line in Barangay Pagangan, Aleosan, Cotabato was bombed on Tuesday (March 1) evening, the third bombing incident to the grid operator's facilities for this year.

On the other hand, Agus-Pulangi hydro-electric power plants in Lanao and Bukidnon, respectively, can only produce up to 20 percent of its full capacity in the last several days.

Given its 900 megawatts expected capacity, it can only deliver 200 megawatts or less, dropping to 150 megawatts because of the low water level due to the El Niño phenomenon.

Hence, the province of Agusan del Sur and Bayugan City are currently experiencing 2 to 3 hour blackouts or rotational load curtailments due to power deficiency reaching as high as 11 Megawatts (MW) during daytime to 13MW or 14MW by nightfall.

Available power supply of the province as of 11:50 on Wednesday (March 2), is only at 19MW compared to the current demand of 30MW - 33MW.

LABOR GROUPS WANT UNIFORM MINIMUM WAGE NATIONWIDE

[By Edu Punay](#) (The Philippine Star) | Updated March 4, 2016 - 12:00am

MANILA, Philippines - Various labor groups yesterday asked the Supreme Court (SC) to strike down Republic Act 6727 or the Wage Rationalization Act that sets different regional minimum wages in the country.

In a 29-page petition, the groups led by senatorial candidate and former Akbayan party-list congressman Walden Bello asked the high court to stop the National Wage and Productivity Commission (NWPC) and all Regional Tripartite Wage and Productivity Boards (RTWPBs) from further issuing regional wage orders.

They also sought the abolition of the 17 RTWPBs and a uniform national minimum wage.

Petitioners that included the Ugnayang Maralita Laban sa Kahirapan (UMALAB KA) party-list, National Federation of Labor (NFL) and Solidarity of Independent and General Labor Organizations (SIGLO), argued that the law being implemented since 1989 violates the equal protection clause of the Constitution.

They said the implementation of Republic Act 6727 has set different minimum wages nationwide with the highest at P481 in the National Capital Region (NCR) and as low as P250 in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

“This disparative absurdity is the effect of 26 years of implementing the provisions of RA 6727,” the petition stated, adding that such disparity has deprived over 62 million laborers nationwide of decent wages.

Through lawyer General Du, petitioners said the law also violates Articles 135 and 248 of the Labor Code, which prohibits labor discrimination.

They cited records showing that only 207,507 of 62,189,000 laborers are covered by collective bargaining agreements (CBAs). “This means that virtually most of the Filipino laborers do not have bargaining power over their employers. That is why living wage legislation is important.”

Petitioners further argued that the wages set by NWPC and RTWPB have failed to meet the suggested living wage by various think tanks.

Data showed that the daily minimum wage in May 2012 was P446 while the family living wage was P1,017 or a discrepancy of P571.

“Minimum wages in the country have long failed to provide for an adequate living wage for laborers. This is due to the fact that the criteria in determining minimum wages as defined by RA 6727 are patently erroneous, biased and ultimately unconstitutional,” the petition stated.

The criteria under RA 6727 to determine minimum wage include demand for a living wage, wage adjustment vis-a-vis the consumer price index, the need to induce industries to invest in the countryside, fair return of capital invested and capacity to pay of employers.

But petitioners stressed that the Constitution does not require fair return of capital for the employers.

“Although the petitioners are not unmindful of the macroeconomic fact that investment demands return, such must not be included in the equation of formulating a living wage, or even a minimum wage for that matter,” they argued.

For minimum wage earners in the regions, the best option is to work in Metro Manila that offers the highest minimum wage in the country.

Froilan Caratihan, a manual operator at a textile company in Muntinlupa, would hear his friends in his hometown in Laguna complain and want to work in Metro Manila.

“They would always say pay in Manila is higher than in our province in Laguna, but we do exactly the same work,” he told The STAR.

Caratihan said he would receive about P9,600 every month as wage while some of his friends would receive only P8,000.

Non-agricultural firms pay a minimum P481 per day in Metro Manila as of April last year, while firms in Laguna pay P362.50, according to the RTWPB.

“These problems would stay for as long as higher wage is given to workers in Metro Manila and lower wage is given to those in the provinces,” Ronald Japzon, president of UMALAB KA told reporters yesterday.

The situation prompted Caratihan and other rank-and-file employees and workers’ groups to file a petition seeking to declare unconstitutional the law mandating provincial rates of wages and creating regional wage boards before the SC yesterday.

Du, counsel for the petitioners, said the law violates the Constitution’s living wage provision, meaning it minimizes wages of workers depending on the region where they work, and “represses the chance to get living wages.” – **With Ghio Ong**

IS-INSPIRED MILITANTS ON OFFENSIVE IN MINDANAO

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

01:14 AM MARCH 4TH, 2016

Militants fighting in the name of the Islamic State (IS) group are escalating attacks in Mindanao, analysts said, deepening fears for the volatile region after its main Moro rebel group and the government had failed to conclude a peace agreement.

Gunmen who have pledged allegiance to the jihadists controlling swaths of Iraq and Syria have instigated a series of deadly battles with the Philippine Army since Congress failed to pass the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) last month.

An assassination attempt this week on a visiting Saudi Arabian preacher who was on an IS hit list has raised the alarm further, although police emphasized they were yet to determine the gunman's motives.

"Their influence is growing stronger and it is expanding," Rodolfo Mendoza, a senior analyst at the Manila-based Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research told Agence France-Presse (AFP), referring to IS.

Mendoza said the various local groups that had pledged allegiance to IS were "planning big operations, like bombings, attacks or assassinations."

Such violence has plagued large areas of the south for decades, as Muslim rebels have fought a separatist insurgency that has claimed 150,000 lives.

The violence has left the region one of the poorest in the Philippines, while allowing warlords and extortion gangs to flourish.

Many of the predominantly Catholic Philippines' Muslim minority live in Mindanao.

The biggest rebel group, the 10,000-strong Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), had been working hard with President Aquino's administration for nearly six years to broker an end to the rebellion.

But when Congress failed to pass the proposed BBL last month that would have granted autonomy to the region, the peace process was frozen.

The MILF has pledged to honor a ceasefire while it waits for Mr. Aquino's successor to be elected midyear.

But hardline groups opposed to compromise with the government have started to take advantage of the vacuum, as they sense an opportunity to raise their profile and prove their credentials to IS, according to analysts.

Growing IS shadow

"There is an incentive if they show that they are a fighting force," Zachary Abuza, a professor at National War College in Washington, who specializes in Southeast Asian security issues, told AFP.

In the most spectacular attack, a previously obscure group discounted by the military as a small-time extortion gang launched an assault on a remote Army outpost in Butig, Lanao del Sur province.

The attack triggered a week of fighting that the military said had left six soldiers and at least 12 militants dead, and forced more than 30,000 people to flee their homes.

The gunmen flew IS flags during the fighting, and bandanas with the group's insignia were found when soldiers overran their base, a two-story concrete building, according to the military.

At the same time, about 100 kilometers away, soldiers were battling a bigger and much better known group that had previously declared allegiance to IS, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

That fighting, which began about a week after Congress missed its deadline to pass the proposed BBL, has claimed the life of one soldier, according to the military.

The clashes are continuing.

AFP video footage on Tuesday showed rockets being fired from an Army helicopter, as well as troops in a cornfield firing mortars and carrying a wounded soldier on an improvised stretcher.

History repeating?

The BIFF split from the MILF in 2008 after the previous peace process collapsed, then carried out attacks on Christian communities that left more than 400 people dead and 600,000 displaced.

"We all know what happened in 2008. We don't want that to happen again," MILF spokesperson Von al-Haq told AFP.

"If the government keeps dragging its feet on the peace process, this fighting will continue and more groups will be enticed to follow Isis," he said, using another name for IS.

Abuza also said more attacks could be expected from other groups that have publicly pledged allegiance to IS in Internet videos over recent years.

These include the Abu Sayyaf, a group of Moro bandits notorious for kidnapping and beheading foreigners.

The violence has over the decades mainly been restricted to the south, many hundreds of kilometers from the capital.

But the Abu Sayyaf bombed a ferry in Manila Bay in 2004, killing more than 100 people.

Authorities have regularly said fears of growing IS influence on Filipino militants are misplaced.

They argue the militants are just criminals interested in money and not radical Islamist jihadists.

But Abuza said the ability of IS to provide money and other forms of support were key to its rising influence in the south, and not its violent brand of Islam.

"It really has nothing to do with ideology," Abuza said "This is all about resources." *TVJ*