

Government to put up seed bank in Banaue rice terraces

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BAGUIO CITY -- The government vowed to put up a "seed bank of the katutubo (indigenous people)" in the Banaue Rice Terraces, which were recently removed from the List of World Heritage Sites in Danger.

Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary Proceso Alcala said the seed bank aims to preserve and sustain native heirloom rice varieties like "tinawon," "unoy" and "ulikan."

"We have accomplished more than 50 percent of the rehabilitation and restoration of the rice terraces. Alongside restoring the grandeur and legacy of the rice terraces, the DA will also procure from Ifugao and other Cordillera farmers heirloom or upland rice varieties that we will maintain, purify and propagate into starter seeds. These will be used for succeeding planting seasons at the rice terraces and other upland areas in the country," he said.

Alcala said the Agriculture department will provide free starter seeds to farmers, on condition that they pay back to the DA in kind, at one and a half sacks for every sack of seeds given them. The collected seed payments will in turn serve as buffer stock for distribution to other farmers. Through this program, Alcala said: "Native heirloom rice varieties are revived and sustained. We will also put up a seed bank for the katutubo to preserve their rice varieties."

He said producing heirloom rice was profitable because they were more expensive than lowland rice. This is despite the low yield of less than three tons per hectare.

Alcala said the planned seed bank would also feature a museum on traditional rice farming and serve as an added cultural and tourist attraction in the area.

The Banaue Rice Terraces, with improvements in its conservation efforts, was finally removed from the List of World Heritage Sites in Danger by the United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization's (Unesco) World Heritage Committee on Tuesday.

The committee noted that the Philippines had successfully met the desired state of conservation through successful landscape restoration and conservation, protection and planning, and proper management.

The famous rice terraces were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1995 as an outstanding cultural landscape that evolved over two millennia. "It was placed on the Danger List in 2001 because of threats to its essential values which required the development of better management and planning," the committee said.

Deforestation, climate change, and the lack of young Ifugao natives willing to keep the farming tradition had threatened to destroy the terraces built some 2,000 years ago.

The Philippines, through efforts of the local government and various national line agencies, sought danger listing as a way to raise national and international support and cooperation in the preservation of these remote high rice fields maintained through transmission of traditional knowledge from one generation to the next, the United Nation's cultural organization said. Ifugao Representative Teodoro Brawner Baguilat Jr. on Friday welcomed the removal of the terraces from the danger list, but said the government and the Ifugao people "must not let their guard down because problems remain."

"We still face problems like poverty that leads to the abandonment of the terraces by Ifugaos who feel they need to go elsewhere to have a better life," said Baguilat in an interview. But, he said the Ifugao people had already taken great steps to take care of their patrimony, that is why the rice terraces are now in much better shape.

Ifugao Governor Eugene Balitang, for his part, said the removal of the rice terraces from the danger list "definitely marked the end of a long battle yet signals another challenge that we Ifugaos must face on."

"This heritage titlist carved by our forefathers with sole purpose for food production more than two thousand years ago harvested us international fame and recognition. It also paved way to the tourism industry in the province," Balitang said.

"We are glad that everybody's efforts had paid off. More than ever, we will continue conserving our rice terraces with more dedication now that we are back as a World Heritage Site," he added.

The officials lauded the government through the DA for pouring in some P20 million funding, and the Department of Social Welfare and Development for infusing P2 million in cash for work to usher the rehabilitation of the Batad rice terraces affected by Typhoon Quiel last year. The Provincial Government also infused funding for the rehabilitation and preservation of rice terraces in Banaue, Mayoyao, Hungduan and Kiangan.

The DA was tasked by President Benigno Aquino III to spearhead the rehabilitation and restoration of the renowned rice terraces. It allocated P30 million for its rehabilitation and restoration to regain its status as a "Globally-Important Agricultural Heritage Systems" as declared by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

Of the P30-million initial fund, Alcala said some P10 million from the DA's National Irrigation Administration would be used to repair eroded and damaged portions, and reinforce the irrigation systems of the rice terraces in Batad town.

The remaining P20 million from the DA's national rice program will be spent to reinforce and upgrade similar rice terraces in four other locations. These include the picturesque Banaue rice terraces that can be seen at the Dianara Viewpoint, and three other rice terraces in Mayoyao, Hapao and Kiangan.

The plan targets the restoration of 8,700 cubic meters of eroded stone walls, rehabilitation of 2.5 kilometers of irrigation system to irrigate 106 hectares of rice paddies, reforestation of 25 hectares of watershed, increase in forest cover in 12 hectares of communal forests called "pinugo," and improvement of five kilometers of farm-to-market roads.

Alcala said the rice terraces' restoration and upgrading plan also includes three major components -- production, extension support, and agri-infrastructure support components. He assured the people of Ifugao that the government will continue with the rehabilitation and restoration of the rice terraces despite the meager funds.

The DA chief is set to visit the Banaue Rice Terraces in July to personally check on the work accomplishment in the area.

He thanked other government agencies, private sector, non-government organizations, and the "bayanihan" system of the people of Ifugao, which he said, had helped in the restoration of the famous Banaue Rice Terraces.

(JM Agreda/PNA/Sun.Star Baguio/Sunnex)

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