



Cuisia urges FilAms to buy Philippine rice

By JUN MEDINA

WASHINGTON - The Philippine Embassy is urging Filipino Americans and all nature-loving people of America to help preserve the centuries-old rice terraces of the Cordilleras as a world heritage site by patronizing the organic heirloom rice that the region is exporting to the United States.

"We call on our kababayans to help preserve the Philippine rice terraces by buying Cordillera heirloom rice that is available here in the US," Ambassador Jose Cuisia Jr. said Wednesday.

"By supporting our own premium rice varieties, we are helping our own upland farmers derive viable income from knowledge and practices obtained from their ancestors while helping create a landscape of beauty," Cuisia added.

He said upland rice varieties known locally as "mina-angan", "hungduan" and "ulikan" which are grown in the historic rice terraces are now being exported to the US.

Some of the rice terraces are said to be more than 2,000 years old and have served as the principal source of rice and vegetables and other food for the indigenous people of the Cordilleras.

Among the most famous are the Ifugao Rice Terraces, which are considered as the "Eighth Wonder of the World" because of their postcard-perfect beauty and symmetry. Located 5,000 feet above sea level, the terraces cover about 6,000 square miles of mountainside patiently carved into terraces by the indigenous people with minimal equipment. Fed by an ancient irrigation system from the rainforests above, the terraces are enough to encircle half of the globe if the steps were put from end to end.

The Philippine Department of Agriculture said an initial 15 metric tons of organic heirloom rice from the Cordilleras was shipped to California on Sept. 20 from the Manila International Container Terminal.

The shipment, which is made up of 10 tons of "mina-angan" variety from Banaue and "hungduan" from Ifugao and five tons of "ulikan" from Pasil and Lubuagan in Kalinga, was consolidated by Rice Terraces Farmers' Cooperative (RTFC), in cooperation with Rice Inc. and Eighth Wonder Inc., a California-based non-government organization that helps market products from the Cordillera rice terraces.

According to Cordillera Regional Agriculture Director Marilyn Sta. Catalina, the grains represent the best in the Cordilleras, notably the industry and ingenuity of its people, as these are organically grown, and manually harvested and pounded to perfection.

"More than profit, we are promoting the rich Cordilleran cultural heritage through this export," said Sta. Catalina.

The shipment, which is part of the 27.6 metric tons that the Philippines will export to the US this year, was sourced from 272 farmers from the three mountain provinces. The remaining volume is undergoing organic fumigation at the Philippine Rice Institute in Nueva Ecija to comply with US sanitary and phytosanitary requirements.

Since 2005, the RTFC has exported 97 tons of heirloom varieties-such as Mt. Province's Mountain Violet variety, Kalinga's unoy, jekot and ulikan red grains and the Ifugao's tinawon, fancy rice and diket.

Agriculture Attaché Dr. Josyline Javelosa said that Agriculture Secretary Proceso Alcala announced in July that the government's partnership with farmers' groups and the private sector allowed the Philippines to exceed its self-imposed target of 100 metric tons of rice exports this year.

Agriculture officials are optimistic that Philippine exports of premium rice varieties could breach the 200 metric tons mark by the end of the year.

The export destinations this year were the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Hong Kong, Germany, Macau, Canada, and the Netherlands. Additional shipments before the end of the year are projected for Russia, Italy, the Middle East and the United States.

Javelosa also said that Vicky Garcia, executive director of Rice Inc., expressed her appreciation for the assistance that the Department of Agriculture has provided to RTFC, which facilitated this year's export shipment to the US through Eight Wonder Inc. Rice Inc., which stands for Revitalize Indigenous Cordilleran Enterprise Initiatives, aims to preserve heirloom rice and the culture of community rice production that surrounds it. Javelosa said that as part of its efforts to further assist upland farmers, the agriculture department has also launched a campaign to preserve farming practices in the northern Philippines and expand overseas markets for indigenous rice varieties.

The campaign includes a P20-million grant that the Ifugao provincial government can tap to rebuild damaged portions of the Batad Rice Terraces as well as DNA fingerprinting by the Philippine Rice Research Institute to protect local heirloom rice varieties, notably Cordillera's frequently exported varieties, from adverse claims.

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