



EDITORIAL

Fight and frustrate the enemy's offensives

Another coordinated offensive of combat, psywar, suppression operations and aerial bombardment is being mounted by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and Philippine National Police (PNP) in different guerrilla fronts across the country with the aim of preventing anniversary celebrations of the New People's Army (NPA) on March 29.

Despite a severe crisis in the economy and people's livelihood, billions upon billions of pesos are being squandered in the costly and corruption-ridden operations of the AFP and PNP. The fascists are crazed to use their new helicopters, drones, fighter planes, guns, cannons and bombs and its thousands of troops to strike fear among the people with their armed might.

Like in December, the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) and the AFP and PNP vainly hope to stop the people and their revolu-

tionary forces from marking the NPA's anniversary. By wisely facing the large-scale operations of the AFP, NPA units succeeded in avoid defensive battles and deny the enemy targets of its combat operations and bombings. As a result, the AFP claimed fewer victories compared to March 2020 despite its nationwide offensive. More importantly, by January, NPA units in different regions were able to mount tactical offensives against tired enemy troops who were running short of supply and set to return to camp after their failed of-

fensive operations. From the start of 2021, the NPA has kept the number of defensives at a low rate compared to the number of its tactical offensives.

To avoid defensives and gain the initiative for mounting tactical offensives, NPA units must maintain a high degree of military discipline and continually improve guerrilla methods to avoid enemy detection either by drones or spies. They must closely monitor the movement of enemy units and read its offensive plans. While the NPA chooses its battles, it must also be always be ready to effectively fight the battles initiated by the enemy.

At the same time, the NPA must plan tactical offensives against the isolated enemy troops, against tactical outposts, supply lines and

other soft targets. The AFP's helicopters, drones, airplanes and other aerial assets are also prized targets of tactical offensives. The NPA must choose the most appropriate place, time and opportunity to mount tactical offensives.

The mass base of support for the people's army must be strengthened continuously especially in the face of relentless and prolonged enemy operations under the AFP's Retooled Community Support Program (RCSP) which serves as veil to garrison villages to suppress the masses and separate them from their army. The links between the army and the masses must not be broken, persevere in strengthening the revolutionary mass organizations and waging agrarian struggles to benefit the masses. In the face of enemy presence, they must master using different forms of organizing and mass struggles combined with the armed struggles of the people's army and militia units. Rely on the deep and wide mass support in collecting in-

telligence, ensuring supplies and augmenting NPA units in waging extensive guerrilla warfare.

While waging tooth-and-nail resistance in consolidated areas, NPA units must expand its area of operations. Mass struggles must be expanded, new organizations built and new guerrilla fronts established. Through continuous expansion, the enemy will be denied of focus areas and will be forced to stretch its forces and open more opportunities for offensive initiatives of the people's army.

The AFP and Duterte have repeatedly failed in their yearly declaration of crushing the NPA. Their psywar and "surrender" drive have been exposed as a farce. Contrary to enemy propaganda, the NPA continues to enjoy deep and wide support among the masses in the



countryside because it advances the struggle for genuine land reform and against all forms of oppression and exploitation. The NPA continues to serve as the peasant masses' guide and assistant in waging agrarian struggles. It continues to perform its tasks in production, economic, education, health, culture and other village affairs.

As in the past, the anniversary of the army and the Party is marked through different forms appropriate to the situation. In areas where there are no military operations, the masses can secretly assemble in the village or mountains. In areas saturated with enemy operating troops, the people and Red fighters can mount smaller activities. Big or small, these activities marking the NPA's founding anniversary share the same significance to serve as an opportunity to remember the people's heroes and martyrs, celebrate achievements, point out weaknesses and further the will to shoulder the difficult tasks in advancing the people's war.

The current situation of the war require the people's army to make great sacrifices. These are needed to preserve the strength of the NPA, deepen mass support and defend the mass organizations and expand the NPA's area of operations. These sacrifices are necessary to advance the Filipino people's cause for national democracy.

AB



Vol. LII No. 5 | March 7, 2021

Ang Ang Bayan is published in Pilipino, Bisaya, Iloko, Hiligaynon, Waray and English.

Ang Bayan welcomes contributions in the form of articles and news items.

Readers are encouraged to send feedback and recommendations for improving our newspaper.



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Ang Bayan is published fortnightly by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines

Recovery work amid Covid-19 and enemy attacks

Amid all-out enemy deployment and focused military operations at a guerrilla front in Southern Tagalog, the New People's Army (NPA) was able to conduct recovery work in Maro.

For nearly a decade, comrades have not been able to conduct revolutionary work in Maro. This is where the seed of the revolution was first sown in the area. It has served as a wellspring of members of revolutionary mass organizations, as well as Red fighters and commanders. As a result, the enemy focused its attacks on Maro to destroy the residents' unity. The military put up a CAFGU detachment and unleashed paramilitary and vigilante groups in the area. Checkpoints were also mounted along roads during the Covid-19 pandemic.

There have been efforts to reach out to the residents of Maro. However, for a long time, the area only served as a passageway of the NPA to other areas. In compliance with the rectification movement and to address the need to expand guerrilla bases, the NPA determinedly returned to Maro.

The NPA unit that was deployed in the area lacked knowledge about the area and its terrain, as well as mass support. They, however, held on to the rich revolutionary history of Maro and bravely reached out to the masses despite massive enemy deployment.

The unit immediately investigated the condition of the masses. Residents were facing severe hardships and loss of livelihood due to the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Many poor peasants and farm workers could not travel to look for additional work due to the militarist lockdown. Majority of the farmers are landless and work under a 60-40 sharing scheme in favor of the landlord.

During its first months in Maro, the NPA unit conducted a sanitation and education campaign on Covid-19. They conducted check-ups and other medical services. They helped farmers' children answer their modules, and taught them how to use cellphones and the internet for flexible learning. The unit also helped in production activities in the area.

With the help of the NPA in their day-to-day activities, the barriofolks' hardships amid the pandemic somehow eased. In turn, the masses now have time to help the NPA unit, such as assisting it to

avoid enemy attacks and guiding Red fighters to safe areas.

The unit's mass work immediately bore fruit when the unit was directed to launch a military action. With the help of the masses, the presence of the NPA unit was concealed from operating soldiers. The unit was also able to mount a successful offensive just two kilometers away from a military and police checkpoint.

Neither heavy military presence nor their lack of knowledge about the area hindered the NPA unit in reaching out to masses in recovery areas. A month after Maro's recovery, the residents held a gathering to celebrate their reunion with the NPA. AB



NPA-Sorsogon ambushes PNP

THREE POLICEMEN WERE wounded in an ambush mounted by the New People's Army (NPA)-Sorsogon in Barangay Putiao, Pilar on February 22. The casualties include MSgt. Osmer Edwin Apa.

The said action was a response to the crimes perpetrated by the PNP against the Sorsoganon masses. The starkest of these include the massacre of five farmers in Dolos, Bulan last year and the killing of Michael Bagasala, a former Red fighter. These operations were conducted in line with the local counterinsurgency program of the Regional Task Force Katoninongan asin Kauswagan.

Misamis Occidental. The NPA ambushed 10th IB troopers in Barangay Lampasan, Don Victoriano on Enero 30. Five soldiers were killed.

Surigao del Sur. Darwin Suazo, an active CAFGU element, was killed in an NPA ambush at Hitaob, Barangay Awasian, Tandag City on February 3.

NPA-EV confident that AFP deadline in Samar will not be met

The New People's Army-Eastern Visayas (NPA-EV) declared that the 8th ID is once again bound to fail in meeting its new deadline to "decimate" three guerrilla fronts in the region by the end of the second quarter of 2021, and another front before Rodrigo Duterte's term ends.

In a report this month, the NPA-EV said that 18 combat battalions of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and Philippine National Police (PNP) are currently operating in the region. This is the largest concentration of state forces deployed in the area in history. At least 15 towns are under focused combat operations, including those in Southern Leyte, Leyte and Biliran which were previously declared "insurgency-free."

In February, 226 elements of the PNP Special Action Force (SAF) were also deployed in the region. In addition, 86 CAFGU detachments are also dispersed across the region. In its operations, the AFP utilizes attack planes, helicopters and drones.

Despite this, the AFP and PNP continues to sustain casualties. On February 13, two PNP-SAF troops were killed in an active defense maneuver by the Rodante Urtal Command in Ginagdanan, San Roque,

Northern Samar. After two days, the same NPA unit ambushed the 43rd IB in Barangay Cagbigajo, Pambujan in the same province.

In February, at least four offensives were mounted by the NPA against operating AFP troops along the boundary of Samar and Eastern Samar.

The forced surrender campaign of the AFP is also futile. The 19th IB itself admitted that "surrendered" actually end up returning to the NPA as full-time fighters. This was declared by the commander of the said military unit during a forced surrender ceremony in Matuguinao in February. AB

Crackdown in Southern Tagalog: 5 killed, 8 arrested

FIVE WERE KILLED and eight others were arrested in Tokhang-style operations perpetrated by the police and military in Southern Tagalog since March 4. These operations were carried out in the early morning.

The police killed Emmanuel Asuncion, leader of the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan)-Cavite, at a labor group's headquarters in Dasmariñas, Cavite on March 7.

Simultaneously, the police nabbed couple Ariel and Chai Evangelista, staff of UMALPAS KA, along with their 10-year old son in Nasugbu, Batangas. The couple were killed while their son managed to escape. The police also killed activists Michael Dasigao and Mark Lee Bacasno of Sikkad-K3 in Montalban, Rizal.

On the same day, the police successively arrested Steve Mendoza of Olalia-KMU and Elizabeth Camoral of Bayan-Laguna in Cabuyao, Laguna; and Nimfa Lanzanas of Kapatid-Southern Tagalog in Calamba.

Two peasant leaders were also arrested in Montalban, Rizal, and another Dumagat in Tanay. The police also raided the house of Lino Baez of Bayan-Batangas in Sto. Tomas. The police failed to arrest him because he was not at home.

On March 4, the police successively arrested Ramir Corcolon, national council member of Courage, in San Pablo, Laguna; and Arnel Laguinas, former unionist at the Honda plant, in Sta. Rosa.

The warrants used in these operations were issued by Laguna RTC Judge Divinagracia Bustos-Ongkeko, Manila RTC Judge Jose dela Rosa, and Manila RTC Judge Jason Zapanta. Dela Rosa was also the judge who issued the warrants that were used by the police who massacred nine Tumandok leaders in Panay in December 2020.

Attacks against Tumandok defenders

STATE AGENTS BRUTALLY attacked two Tumandok defenders in the past week.

Julie Catamin, captain of Barangay Roosevelt in Tapaz, Capiz, was gunned down by policemen on February 28 in Malitbog in the same town. Catamin earlier exposed that firearms and explosives were planted by the police in the houses of her constituents who were arrested in December 2020. The arrests took place in conjunction with the massacre of nine farmers known as the Tumandok 9.

On March 3, two unidentified male assailants stabbed Atty. Angelo Karlo Guillen in the head and back in Gen. Luna St., Iloilo City. Guillen serves as lawyer of the Tumandoks and farmers who were arrested in Capiz and Iloilo in December 2020. He is also one the lawyers of groups who petitioned against the Anti-Terror Law (ATL). He is the secretary general of the National Union of People's Lawyers-Panay.

Violence against Moros under the guise of "counterterrorism"

Even amid the pandemic, the Duterte regime continues to unleash violent attacks against Moro communities under the pretext of "war on terror." Since December 2020, thousands of families have evacuated due to the attacks perpetrated by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in their communities purportedly to go after "remaining forces" of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Abu Sayyaf and small bandit groups linked by the regime and the US to "ISIS." At least six minors and a pregnant woman were killed in these operations.

Lanao del Sur. Three children were killed and a pregnant woman was wounded in an attack carried out by the 5th IB at the Moro Islamic Liberation Front Extension Camp in Amai Manabilang on February 20. The soldiers also shelled and strafed the community for 15 minutes.

On February 4, the 55th IB bombed communities in Alongan and Buayan, Datu Piang after supposedly "sighting" BIFF and Dawlah Islamiyah elements in the area.

Basilan. On January 29, more than 40 families evacuated from

their community in Barangay Bohobaca, Tipo-tipo after being attacked by AFP troops. One civilian was killed and another was wounded.

In Barangay Seronggonon, around 200 families evacuated on January 12 after their community was attacked by the Joint Task Force Basilan.

Maguindanao. Two children were seriously wounded when the 57th IB bombed communities in Sambulawan, Datu Salibo on December 13, 2020. One of the victims died last February 14.

The 57th IB and 2nd Mechanized Battalion also bombed and strafed Barangay Pusaw in Shariff Saydona Mustapha on December 15, 2020. Rabea Damada Lakim, who was then 7-months pregnant, was killed during the attack. The bombing resulted in the evacuation of around 1,500 families.

On January 30, more than 600 families evacuated from Tapatan, Barangay Kitango, Datu Saudi Ampatuan after an encounter between the AFP and BIFF in the area.

Sulu. In Patikul and Jolo, at least 12 Moro women were arrested in two raids on October 10, 2020 and February 19 on the pretext that they are "potential suicide bombers." Several of the arrested women were nursing their infant babies. The military identified them as wives and children of Abu Sayyaf leaders. AB

Successive killing of 5 civilians in Bicol

FIVE CIVILIANS WERE killed by the military and police in separate incidents since March 1 in Camarines Norte and Camarines Sur. The military claimed that all of the victims were killed after attempting to "fight back," and that they were all members or supporters of the New People's Army.

Three were massacred in Barangay Lanot, Mercedes, Camarines Norte on March 3. The fascists gunned down the victims who were identified as Enrique Cabilles, Arnel Candelaria and Nomer Peda.

In Labo, soldiers killed village watchman Melandro Verso in Barangay Talobatib on March 1. Around 70 soldiers raided his house. On the same day, another resident was killed in Barangay Balogo, Pasacao, Camarines Sur.

Arrest. In Sorsogon, the 22nd IB arrested farmer Salvador Magas in Barangay Marinab, Bulan on February 23. The victim sustained a gunshot wound during the operation.

In December 2020, the military also arrested Enriqueta Guelas, 62, and Elizabeth Estilon, 41 in Barangay Lalud, Bulusan. Estilon was pregnant during the arrest. They are the second batch of victims charged with violating the Anti-Terror Law.

In Negros Occidental, joint forces of the 94th IB and police raided three houses in Barangay San Antonio, Himamaylan City on March 3. Arrested during the operation were farmers Salvador Carpentero and Jillian Delfin.

House Bill contravenes "presumption of innocence"

THE MAKABAYAN BLOC strongly opposed a bill which hurdled the Congress last March 2 which contravenes the basic right of the accused to be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

It said that the House Bill No. 7814 will deny suspected drug suspects of their right to due process.

Under this bill, a person is presumed guilty as a protector or coddler of illegal drugs on the mere basis that they know someone who is a drug exporter or importer and help them evade arrest.

A person who is found to have in his possession a receipt or any document in connection with drug importation and export is also automatically presumed guilty. Any evidence showing that money was transferred to a drug importer or exporter would also be considered a proof of consent. The bill also has many other provisions which contravene the basic rights of individuals whether they are actually involved in illegal drugs or not.

The politics of vaccines

Rodrigo Duterte personally welcomed the arrival of Chinese vaccines at the Villamor Airbase last February 28. On March 4, almost 500,000 doses from the World Health Organization's Covax Facility also arrived. Aside from health workers, the regime has prioritized soldiers and police personnel. The Philippines is the last country in Southeast Asia to secure vaccines despite having the second highest number of infections in the region. The vaccines arrived at a time when 241 million doses have already been administered in 103 countries worldwide.

Data by *Bloomberg* in February 12 indicate that existing Philippine supply contracts only covered 36.2% of the population. Not one of these have arrived in the country. Despite having vaccines, hesitancy is prevalent in the Philippines. Some health workers have refused to get inoculated with Sinovac due to reports that it has low efficacy rate among their ranks.

Vaccine diplomacy

The 600,000 CoronaVac doses made by Sinovac Biotech is a "donation" from China. This forms part of what is called vaccine diplomacy and is not part of the government's planned acquisition for which it has borrowed billions of pesos. Instead of using vaccines for overall humanitarian aims, countries who manufacture them are using their supply to further their economic, political and diplomatic objectives. China's "donation," for example, is said to have the condition that 100,000 doses should be given to the military. This is on top of contracts for additional doses, projects or loans, greater influence and so on.

China also practices vaccine diplomacy in Latin America, Africa and other nations in Southeast Asia. It made available \$1 billion in loans for countries to purchase Chinese-made vaccines. It prioritized Pakistan, Nepal and Cambodia's militaries — countries which border its nemesis, India.

Like China, Israel also practices vaccine diplomacy, albeit in a worse way. It gave "extra" doses to coun-

tries supportive of its occupation of Jerusalem. Meanwhile, it has refused its obligation to provide for Palestinians in occupied territories. It has inoculated 50% of its population at present, but gave Palestine a mere 2,000 doses.

India and Russia likewise use their vaccines to further military aims.

Vaccine nationalism

Selective vaccine diplomacy wreaked havoc on WHO's efforts to ensure that health workers and vulnerable groups in poorer countries are not left out. But the center established for this purpose, the Covax Facility, has long been undermined by the hoarding of vaccine supplies by wealthier countries in what is termed as vaccine nationalism.

Under vaccine nationalism, 60% of global vaccine supplies have been reserved to service 16% of the

global population. According to reports, the US reserved vaccines that is four times the size of its population, while Canada, six times and countries in the European Union, twice.

Because of this, the Covax Facility gathered very limited supplies. In December 2020, the facility accumulated 400 million doses of its 2 billion target. Instead of giving out vaccines, the US pledged only to give funds. Three out of six vaccines are controlled by the US. It also has one of the highest manufacturing capacities. Mexico recently asked the US for vaccines but was refused because the Biden administration "prioritizes the American people."

It also refused the Philippines' request despite Filipino officials offering more money. It announced that it will first complete inoculation of its own citizens, making its vaccines available to the rest of the world on the second half of the year.

A minimum of 60% of the population must be inoculated before herd immunity is achieved, according to the WHO. Due to vaccine nationalism, countries who have no or less funds to buy vaccines will be supplied only by 2024. AB



Vaccine hesitancy

Around the world, there is prevalent hesitancy and mistrust in Covid-19 vaccines. This is due to lack of trust in the safety, importance and effectiveness of vaccines in the past years. In many countries, the people's hesitance to be vaccinated is rooted in their histories.

In the US, for example, more Blacks and Hispanics mistrust vaccines compared to whites. This is because there have been many cases in the past where they were subjected to experiments or studies without their consent. Their mistrust also stems from the racial bias of the health system favoring whites.

In a study conducted from 2015 to 2019, vaccine confidence plummeted in the Philippines, especially for those administered to children due to documented fears over the Dengvaxia vaccine. Around the same time, vaccine confidence also registered a low in Europe. This is despite studies proving that many of the vaccines are safe and effective.

Vaccine hesitancy is also linked to big pharmaceutical companies' secrecy of their researches, which is the nature of the industry where vaccines are developed and manufactured not for the common good but for capitalist profit.

In spite of all this, the World Health Organization maintains it is important at this stage to protect the people, especially health workers and vulnerable groups, against hospitalization, severe sickness and death. All approved Covid-19 vaccines have been proven effective against these. It has strongly recommended these vaccines even in countries where new variants have emerged. AB

EDSA 35. More than 500 individuals converged at Camp Aguinaldo in Cubao, Quezon City on February 25 to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the EDSA uprising. The program was spearheaded by the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan) and other national democratic organizations. Similar protest actions were mounted in Laguna, Angeles City, Baguio City, and Naga City.

BakwitSchool7. Members of the Save Our Schools Network protested in Quezon City on February 22, and in Cebu City on February 28 to demand the immediate release of three Lumad students, two teachers and two datos who were arrested at a Bakwit School in Cebu last month. They also condemned the regime for forcing seven Lumad children to go back to their homes, and the transfer of detainees without the knowledge of their lawyers and relatives.

DuterTUTA. Members of the League of Filipino Students held a lightning rally in front of the US Embassy in Manila on March 5 to oppose continuing US intervention in the country.

Number of economically insecure women climbs by 3.5 million

The number of economically insecure women increased by 3.5 million nearly a year since the lockdown was imposed by the Duterte regime. From 16 million in 2019, this climbed to 19.54 million in 2020.

Women farmers and workers suffered the from very low farm gate prices and widespread shut-down of small business. This includes the 1,000 workers of Hanes, a garment manufacturing company in Laguna, who recently lost their jobs after the company was shut-down. Majority of its workers are women.

In other parts of the globe, there are more women than men who lost their jobs and/or chose to stay at home to attend to their families. A research in March 2021 which analyzed data from the US and India indicates that the per-

centage of women workers who lost their jobs during the pandemic is double than that of men. Overall, women make up 39% of global employment but account for 54% of the total job losses. This is because most of them work in economic sectors which were worst hit by the pandemic. Many of them are forced to shoulder more housework and assist their children in online classes due to school closures.

Data in the Philippines is worse where many women have long been not counted as part of the labor force. In the October 2020 labor force survey, the participation rate



for women was only 45%, compared to 72.3% for men.

A research on the e-commerce sector in Asia also indicates that more female Filipino workers lost their jobs compared to their counterparts in other countries. The number of women in executive positions is lower last year compared to 2018. Less female executives lost their jobs in Thailand, Hongkong and Vietnam which implemented less rigid lockdown restrictions. AB

—IN—SHORT

99%

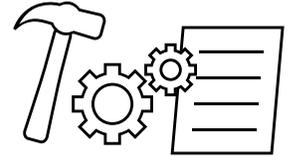
or 14.5 million

of students "passed" the blended learning program in the 1st quarter of the school year. The rate is questionable according to senators.

Source: Senate Hearing, March 3, 2021

↑ ₱100

daily wage increase demanded by workers amid rising prices of basic commodities amid the pandemic.



↓ ₱700 million

daily income lost by workers in areas that remain under general community quarantine.

Source: Department of Labor and Employment, March 2021

2,800

cases of racist attacks and discrimination against Asian American in the US during the Covid-19 pandemic. Cases in 2020 were 8 times higher than in 2019.

Source: Stop AAPI Hate



More than 60

rallyists killed by the military and police in Myanmar since February 26 in daily protests mounted by people against the military junta established more than a month ago.

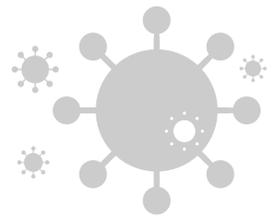
₱500 BILLION AND ₱921 MILLION

value of contracts awarded to Chinese companies voided by government officials from January to February.

These include companies involved in Chinese construction of illegal structures in the West Philippine Sea.

B.1.351

Covid-19 variant first detected in South Africa.



Reports last March 2 indicate that 6 Filipinos were infected with this variant.

PROCLAMATION 1107

reclassified three special non-working holidays

(special days with no work but with pay) into special working holidays for 2021.

- November 2
- December 24
- December 31

Telcos rake in billions during pandemic despite slow service

Telecommunications corporations (telcos) were able to rake in billions of income during the lockdown as the Filipino majority were forced to avail of their poor, slow and unstable internet services. The number of home broadband subscribers recorded the highest increase due to work-from-home arrangements and online classes. According to a senator, unlike electricity bill which can be paid in installments, telco subscriptions are paid in full. Prepaid subscribers are obliged to pay in advance to avail of services offered by the telcos.

According to Manuel Pangilinan, chief of PLDT (under which Smart Communications operates), 2020 was a "sterling year" for his company. He said that PLDT was able to earn record-high revenues of ₱171.5 billion in 2020. The net income of the company also rose by 9% to ₱124.5 billion due to the expansion of its broadband service by 18%. It currently has 73 million subscribers.

On the other hand, the revenue of Globe Telecommunications shrank by 2% and its net income by 13% in 2020. However, it still earned ₱19.5 billion due to the 23% increase in its home broadband subscribers. It cur-

rently has 76.6 subscribers.

Mobile internet speed in the country increased in 2020 compared to 2019. From 111th in 2019, the Philippines is now ranked as the 86th top country in terms of mobile internet speed. However, the average mobile internet speed in the country (25.77 megabytes per second or mbps) is just above half of the global average (46.74 mbps). The average speed of fixed internet has not improved at 32.73 mbps, or less than half of the 98.96 mbps global average. Last year, telcos have been bombarded with complaints as customers experienced frequent ser-

vice disruptions while having online meetings and classes which need stable internet connections. Mobile internet signal is transmitted through cell sites, while fixed internet is transmitted through fiber, cable or DSL.

The coverage of internet services in the country is still very limited. Currently, there are only 20,000 cell towers which serve a total of 113 million subscribers in the country. This means that up to 4,000 households are forced to share one cell tower. Experts however said that the ideal ratio of households per cell tower is 100 to 200 households or 1,000 subscribers. The country would need 50,000 more cell towers to be at par with other countries with more stable internet services such as Vietnam.

A senate hearing last March 4 revealed that only 3.6 million out of 22 million public school students have access to internet. AB

Biden's imperialist politicking in the Middle East

US PRES. JOSEPH Biden's imperialist maneuvers in the Middle East during the last week of February were met with widespread criticism. On the one hand, he ordered the US military to bomb Syria under the pretext of "war on terrorism." On the other hand, he refused to punish the prince of Saudi Arabia who was exposed in a report to have been directly involved in the killing of an American journalist.

The bombing in Syria last February 26 was the first military action that was directly ordered by Biden. It hit an area along the boundary of Syria and Iraq. It killed 17 civilians, who according to the Pentagon are members of terrorist organizations.

Syria called the bombing an attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. The

attack was contrary to Biden's promise to end the decades-old aggression of the US in the region. Currently, the northeastern part of the country is occupied by US troops and their militia allies. The Delta Crescent Energy, a US oil company, is located in the area. The company was allowed to enter and illegally operate in the country by the Syrian Democratic Forces in

2020.

On the other hand, Biden refused to impose sanctions against Saudi Arabia crown prince Mohammed bin Salman who ordered the abduction, torture and brutal killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. Khashoggi was known as a staunch critic of the prince who regularly wrote about Saudi's crackdown against activists and its brutal war in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia is among the closest allies of the US in the Middle East. It has the biggest oil reserves globally, and serves as the US' source of 10 million barrels of oil imports daily. AB

Paper industry on the brink of collapse

The sole newsprint manufacturing company in the country was among the enterprises which went bankrupt and shuttered during the pandemic. In a hearing by the Tariff Commission on February 16, the Trust International Paper Corp. (TIPCO) formally announced that it has already shut down its plant in Mabalacat, Pampanga on June 2020. All of its 258 workers were re-trenched.

The company hopes to restart its operations but prospects remain dim.

TIPCO attributed its bankruptcy primarily to the flooding of imported paper in the market and the absence of support for local producers. Just like other local companies, TIPCO suffered huge losses as it spent more for production with less advanced machinery, unable to compete with foreign companies who sold their products at lower prices. The company's income was not enough to upgrade its machineries. Its sales and income shrank after the government dismantled the tariff on imported paper.

Conservative estimates by the Tariff Commission sought a duty of at least ₱2,470 per metric ton on paper products to safeguard local companies. However, the Department of Trade and Industry only implemented a tariff of ₱980 per metric ton on newsprint in 2015. This was further decreased by the Duterte regime to ₱800 in 2016, and to ₱640 in 2017.

Many local companies have closed down over the past two decades. Currently, there are only 23 paper manufacturing companies left in the country, from 43 in 2001 and 27 in

2010. Majority (21) of the remaining plants are in Luzon. These companies manufacture paper products including writing and printing paper, tissue, cartons, paper bags, and brown packaging paper. These products are produced primarily using imported virgin pulp and wastepaper.

The total value of paper produced in the Philippines decreased from ₱26 billion in 2019 to ₱21 billion in 2020. On the other hand, its imports increased to ₱71.2 billion in 2019, almost seven times higher than the ₱10.4 billion recorded in 2005.

The absence of technology to manufacture virgin pulp is a big hindrance to local producers. The country's unrestricted importation of virgin pulp started in 2010 after the processing plant of the Paper

Industries Corporation of the Philippines (PICOP) in Surigao del Sur closed down. PICOP was the sole local company capable of manufacturing the said product.

As an alternative, local companies use recycled wastepaper in producing paper products. There are around 80 processing plants in the country with the capacity to convert wastepaper. However, a report by the Food and Agriculture Organization in 2014 indicates that this technology is not enough to meet the internal demand for paper. In fact, local producers also imports a portion (10%) of the wastepaper which they utilize. The quality of paper produced by local companies is weaker because of their relatively backward technology. As a result, local producers could not compete with big foreign companies who can produce more paper at cheaper costs.

There are also four abaca pulp manufacturing companies in the Philippines. The said product can be used to manufacture paper money, tea bags and other paper products.

However, the country do not benefit from these as their products are mainly for export.

Nearly two-thirds of the total amount of the abaca pulp manufactured in the country are exported to Europe. The largest of these companies is the Newtech Pulp in Lanao del Norte, a subsidiary of US-based multinational company Glatfelter. Among Glatfelter' major clients is Unilever, a Europe-based company which owns Lipton Tea.

