

Column for Manila Bulletin
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Of Trees and Forest

Expanding the Basic Necessities List

DID you know that the Philippines is one of the world's top consumers of instant noodles?

Statistics published on the Internet show global instant noodle consumption at 98.2 billion packs in 2011, of which China and Hong Kong account for the biggest share at 42.47 billion packs. The Philippines ranked ninth with total consumption of 2.84 billion packs, behind Indonesia with 14.53 billion packs, Japan (which invented instant noodles) with 5.51 billion packs, Vietnam with 4.9 billion packs, United States with 4.03 billion packs, Republic of Korea with 3.59 billion packs, India with 3.53 billion packs, and Thailand with 2.88 billion packs.

Drinking bottled water has also become part of the daily diet of Filipinos. The latest available data, based on information provided by the Beverage Marketing Corporation and published on the Web, place per capita bottled water consumption in the Philippines at 12.6 liters in 1999 and 16.4 liters in 2004.

That's an annual increase of about 6 percent. Using that growth rate for the succeeding years will give us a per capita consumption of 24.72 liters for 2012. With a population of about 96 million, our total daily consumption of bottled water would be about 2.37 billion liters.

These figures show how instant noodles and bottled drinking water have become important parts of the daily food and beverage consumption of Filipinos.

We can also assume that consumption of instant noodles (which are easy to prepare) and bottled water and potable water in containers (which is easily transported and distributed) on the list of basic necessities under Republic Act No. 7581 or the Price Act for the purpose of protecting consumers against undue price increases during calamities, emergency, widespread illegal price manipulation and other similar situations.

The Committee on Trade and Commerce, which I chair, has submitted to the Senate a report recommending the approval of House Bill 4801 and taking into consideration Senate Bills 669, 1306, 1612, and 3527, authored by Senators Jinggoy Estrada, Miriam Defensor Santiago, Francis Escudero, and myself, which will amend RA 7581.

At present, RA 7581 lists basic necessities the following items: rice; corn; bread; fresh, dried and canned fish and other marine products; fresh pork, beef and poultry meal; fresh eggs; fresh and processed milk; fresh vegetables; root crops; coffee; sugar; cooking oil; salt; laundry soap; detergents; firewood; charcoal; candles; and drugs classified as essential by the Department of Health.

The demand for noodles, which is now produced in 80 countries, continues to increase. In particular, instant noodle has become the new staple for many poor Filipino families because it is cheaper and easier to prepare than rice. And, by its very nature, bottled water or potable water in containers has become one of the most essential goods, in the same ranks of basic necessities as rice, corn, bread, fish, pork and poultry.

Thus, we have to ensure the availability of instant noodles and drinking water in bottles and other containers at reasonable prices, particularly during calamities and other emergencies.

My committee's report noted that in the aftermath of the last five most disastrous storms and natural calamities "Ondoy," "Pepeng," "Milenyo," "Pedring," and "habagat monsoon," instant noodles and potable water in containers were two of the most in-demand items and had the biggest tendency to be overpriced, to the detriment of disaster victims and other consumers.

The consolidated bill is a simple legislation with the noblest of purpose: to protect disaster victims from overpricing and supply manipulation by unscrupulous producers and traders during crises.

So I expect the cooperation of the Senate as well as its speedy action to help our countrymen. And I hope to see this measure signed into law at the soonest possible time or before the next calamity strikes us!

(For comments/feedback email to: mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com. Readers may view previous columns at www.senatorvillar.com)

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