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INQUIRER SOUTHERN LUZON

# Inquirer Southern Luzon : Iwahig goes rice planting

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY – As the Arroyo administration scrambles for more rice imports to boost local production so it can avert a looming shortage, the country's largest prison camp nearly 10 times larger than the entire city of Makati has launched a major bid to go rice planting.

The city government, the Bureau of Corrections and the Department of Agriculture have joined forces to develop the 26,000-hectare Iwahig penal farm on the foothills of Mt. Irawan into a rice basket, according to Mayor Edward Hagedorn. "Under our agreement, the city government will provide the logistical requirements and assistance in the propagation of seedlings while the Department of Agriculture will provide technical support," he told the Inquirer on Tuesday.

Currently, the open correctional facility has 150 hectares dedicated to seedlings production, according to prison Supt. Francisco Abonales.

Corrections Director Oscar Calderon, a former Philippine National Police chief, said 6,000 hectares of new planting areas would be initially opened up inside the facility, utilizing Iwahig's over 3,000 prisoners as farm workers.

"Mayor Hagedorn and myself have agreed on that initial target and I think it will go a long way in helping the national government find solutions to address the rice problem," Calderon said in a separate interview.

### Penal colonies

Abonales said the facility would soon be able to provide the seedlings not only for the project but also for the entire province. "Currently, the province is still importing seedlings from as far as Bicol. We will soon be able to address the supply needs of Palawan and even beyond," he said.

In Lucena City, Ricardo Macala, who served as Bucor chief from 2001 to 2003, urged the government to revive rice production in the vast tracts of arable idle land inside penal colonies. They have large fertile plantation areas with plenty of water supply from rain forests and "dedicated" prisoner-farmers willing to offer their services, he said.

Aside from the Iwahig farm, the penal colonies in Sablayan in Occidental Mindoro has 16,000 hectares of plantation areas; Abuyog in Leyte, 12,000 hectares; and Davao, 5,500 hectares.

Macala recalled that in 2003, Bucor and the Philippine Rice Institute entered into a joint venture to transform farmlands inside the Iwahig into productive rice farms using GMA Super Rice seeds. But the project was terminated when he was relieved, he said.

GMA Super Rice is a hybrid variety that can produce up to 250 cavans of good, commercial rice per hectare, bigger than the national average yield of about 80 cavans.

[^ Back to top](#)