



It is not only bullets that kill Filipino farmers

Kodao Productions, Radio Veritas
Philippines

On the first day of April, a day which the rest of the world jocularly celebrates as April Fool's Day, a heart breaking event happened in Mindanao Island in the Philippines.

(Sfx: Dispersal noise, gunfire)

Six thousand farmers massed in Kidapawan, North Cotabato were fired upon by fully-armed Special Weapons and Tactics personnel of the Philippine National Police. At least two died, 30 were injured, 79 were arrested, 74 of whom were criminally charged.

This is Raymund Villanueva of Kodao Productions in Manila.

(Kodao jingle)

The Philippines is an agricultural economy with a feudal political structure. Seventy-five percent of its people depend on agriculture while its biggest landholdings are owned by just a handful of families and local and foreign corporations. In fact, its sitting president Benigno Aquino III is a landlord who pays his agricultural workers 25 US cents a week to work on the vast hacienda that courts have declared are owned by the farmers in the first place.

Located in Western Pacific, tropical Philippines is regularly hit by El Niño, a phenomenon that warms ocean waters and worsens the periodic drought on its farmlands. This affects the small and poor farmers the hardest.

In Western and Central Mindanao, a breadbasket region that produces rice and corn, very little rainfall has blessed the farmlands since 2015 causing prolonged drought, drying up rivers, parching the soil, failing crops and setting off widespread hunger.

(Sfx: wind noise)

In the province of North Cotabato alone, 28,000 hectares of rice and corn farms are affected. In February in nearby Maguindanao province, 37-year old farmer Jimmy Tamberya committed suicide after his crops failed yet again because of the drought.

It wasn't as if the Aquino government was not given ample warning.

Feny Cosico is the secretary general of the group Agham, an organization of scientists and engineers who advocate for science and technology for the people. They train peasant communities on

sustainable agricultural practices. She reveals warnings issued long before the calamity hit Filipino farmers.

(Feny, on warnings)

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) made an announcement on September of 2015 that there is a mature and strong El Nino that is emanating from the Tropical Pacific Ocean. This El Nino is reported to be comparable in strength or may even surpassed the 1997-1998 El Nino event and this current El Nino episode will persist until the second quarter of 2016.

Based on the forecast model, the Mindanao region will experienced below normal rainfall and above normal temperature. The impacts to the agriculture are drought and water shortage that would lead to food crisis. In the 1997-1998 El Niño, about 74,000 hectares of agricultural land in 18 provinces were affected, 74 people died and almost half a million agricultural families faced food-insecurity. Severe impact was felt in Mindanao.

The current El Niño episode has already resulted to a sharp drop in agricultural production in Central Mindanao. As of September of 2015, two provinces in Mindanao, Lanao del Sur and Sulu in ARMMM were already classified as areas in the state of chronic food insecurity.

Dry spell brought about by El Nino would result to moisture stress of staple crops such and rice and corn. This would result to below normal yield of crops or zero harvest. And this has been experienced in Mindanao were 70 to 100 percent of food crops has no chance of recovery.

Mercedita Iyong, a farmer in North Cotabato, describes their desperation:

(Mercedita)

(Translation: We went to Kidapawan because of the grave crisis that we North Cotabato farmers suffer. El Niño has been hitting us hard. All of us in North Cotabato at the moment are deep in debt in all sorts of loans just to tide ourselves from our hunger.

In January this year, the provincial government of North Cotabato declared a state of calamity in 17 towns and their capital city of Kidapawan, the purpose of which was to be able to use its calamity fund worth 15 million dollars. The farmers hoped that help would finally come, but none did. Its leading politicians, belonging to the ruling political party are busy wooing votes for the national elections this coming May.

In March 28, about six thousand farmers from various towns in North Cotabato massed in Kidapawan City. They barricaded the main road, near the National Food Authority warehouse, to demand for 15 thousand sacks of rice to be distributed among them. This would allow them relief from hunger for a few weeks, until, hopefully, they can plant and harvest again, weather permitting.

The government had a counter offer: three kilos of rice per family per month. The farmers were aghast. Three kilos of rice would only last them three days, they said. On the third day of the farmers' barricade, the government could no longer tolerate what they obviously regarded as impudence by the starving farmers.

(Shouting, negotiations.)

And then...

(Commotion and gun fire)

Twenty-two year old farmer Darwin Sulang of Arakan town and a bystander, 30-year old Enrico Fabligar of Kidapawan, died. Dozens others were injured, several gravely. Among those arrested were elderly farmers, three pregnant protesters and two nurses who only wanted to give them first aid. Inside a church compound where they sought refuge, they were shot at by police snipers. They were then held hostage by both the police and the Philippine Army. The bishop who took them in was threatened and human rights defenders who came to their aid were harassed. Food and donations from private citizens were prevented from reaching the victims.

Jerome Aba was there, negotiating for the farmers when this happened.

(Jerome)

Jerome said that on the first day of the farmers' barricade, the police came accompanied by armed community action teams. They were perplexed with the presence of the SWAT, with M16 and M14 assault rifles, perched on top of fire trucks. Their guns were trained on the farmers. Jerome approached police colonel Alexander Tagum to tell him that the presence of guns in a protest assembly isn't allowed. The police commander refused to listen. He told Jerome that he should not tell him what to do as he knows what he is doing. Governor Lala Taliño Mendoza also could not meet with the farmers because she was in Manila to receive an award... But at seven o'clock that night, Chief of Police Kalinga informed Jerome that the governor would be willing to meet with three farmer-leaders. The farmers refused, afraid that the governor would only arrest their three representatives. What the farmers wanted was for the governor to meet them all at the barricade. The governor refused. She said the farmers should not give her orders.

A week after the carnage, the blame game is at its peak. Government officials are blaming activists for allegedly instigating the farmers to demand for relief. Human rights defender Cristina Palabay, however, has this to say about what prompted the violent dispersal.

(Cristina)

Translation: This dispersal happened because the local government wanted to save face with the Liberal Party. Its candidate for the presidency Mar Roxas is there. Just to save face. This is very painful. Those in this administration are heartless. Just to save face with the Liberal Party, they killed a farmer. They rained bullets on the farmers whose demands from this government are really legitimate. This only shows that this so-called straight-path government is soaked with the blood of the people.

In the midst of the political din, many farmers who have been recently allowed to leave their church sanctuary have gone back to their parched farmlands. They brought home to their families some kilos of rice that have been donated by private citizens, but none from the government who refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the farmers' demands, only the legitimacy of its well-aimed bullets.

There, the farmers can only look at their dying crops, relentlessly being scorched by an infernal heat and drought.

Scientist Cosico explains what the government could have done with its funds to mitigate the effects of the drought and prevent the bloodshed.

(Feny)

It should first address chronic food insecurity by providing food relief to the farmers severely affected by El Nino. Secondly, the government must prioritize modernizing the local agriculture in order to accelerate food production, to use climate resilient varieties, and provide agricultural provisions such as irrigation and other postharvest facilities to capacitate the farmers to adapt to the extreme weather events due to climate variability.

Tragically, the Aquino government is in no such frame of mind, busy as it is in campaigning for yet another landlord to become the next president of this benighted land.

(Sfx: Roxas na! chant)

Indeed, it is not only bullets that kill peasants in the Philippines. Who the Philippine government wants killed, it first starves with inaction and heartlessness.

From Manila, Philippines, this is Raymund Villanueva of Kodao Productions.

(Kodao jingle)

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