

Fact Finding and Solidarity Mission and the People's Struggle Against Land Grabbing and Displacement in Coron and Busuanga, Palawan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Katipunan ng Samahan ng Magbubukid sa Timog Katagalugan (KASAMA-TK) and Anakpawis - Southern Tagalog (Anakpawis-TK) jointly organized a National Fact Finding and Solidarity Mission (NFFSM) to the affected communities of the Yulo King Ranch (YKR) in Coron and Busuanga, Palawan from 14th to 20th of June 2014.

The team is composed of representatives from Federation of Coron, Busuanga Farmers Association, KASAMA-TK, Anakpawis-TK, PAMALAKAYA-TK, Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP), Anakpawis-National, Office of Bayan Muna Reps. Carlos Zarate and Neri Colmenares, Asian Peasant Coalition (APC), Ibon International, People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS), and Justice and Peace for the Integrity of God's Creation - Baclaran, Permanent Commission on Social Mission Apostolate Redemptorists - Vice Province of Manila.

The fact finding team aimed to consolidate narratives of residents from affected barangays (villages) to understand the history of the disputed land, know the plight and demands of the affected residents and formulate actions that will support and strengthen their rights to food, land and a dignified livelihood.

They conducted interviews and focus group discussions in eight barangays namely, Decalachao, Guadalupe, San Jose, San Nicolas in Coron and in Quezon, New Busuanga, Cheey and Sto. Niño in Busuanga.

Key Findings

The Yulo King Ranch, which covers 39,238.93 hectares, is the largest agrarian anomaly in the country, where 22,268 hectares are in Coron and the remaining 16,970.53 hectares are in Busuanga.

Of these, 12,817 has. is categorized as Alienable and Disposable Lands where 2,441 has. is privated or titled and the remaining 10,376 has. is public land. According to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), 1,575 has of titled lands has been distributed under Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) through the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) and the remaining 866.5 has. had not been distributed. The 15,389.03 has. is reserved as *Public Forest* and the remaining 11,032.28 has. is Unclassified Public Forest.

There were already farmers who were tilling the land even before YKR came. The mission team interviewed one of the original residents who narrated that they were ten to 15 farming families already living in the area since 1930s.

In 1975, Former president Ferdinand Marcos issued Proclamation No. 1387, declaring the disputed lands as pasture reserve.

Marcos, through his cronies Luis Yulo and Peter Sabido, acquired the disputed land using public funds. According to residents interviewed, the “King” in YKR referred to Marcos.

YKR was among the properties sequestered by the Presidential Commission on Good Government in 1986, following the ousting of the Marcos regime. The administration of YKR was eventually transferred to Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI), which converted the property to the Busuanga Breeding and Experimental Stations (BBES).

However, on March 2010, the Supreme Court ordered the government to lift the sequestration of YKR due to mismanagement of the property. From 1986, the ranch had 75,477 cattle and 115 horses. By 2005, there were only 2,565 cattle and 76 horses left on the ranch. According to the villagers interviewed there were only 1,700 cattle available which includes 20 carabaos and 70 horses.

Meanwhile, President Benigno Simeon Aquino signed on October 14, 2013 Proclamation 663 abolishing Presidential Proclamation 2057 of former President Gloria Macapagal -Arroyo which authorized *Philippine Forest Corp*(Philforest) to administer the development of the areas covered by the Busuanga Pasture Reserve. The Aquino administration had transferred the administration of Busuanga Pasture Reserve to the Forest Management Bureau (FMB) of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) from PhilForest which has been recommended abolished after being one of the state firms linked to the P10-billion pork barrel scam.

The team found out that Mayor Fems Reyes is eyeing for the “development” of the Yulo King Ranch for the relocation of government offices, establishment of big commercial, industrial and residential areas in the 22,000-hectare ranch. Part of the plan to boost the eco-tourism potential of Coron is to encourage investors to put up tourism-related establishments along Coron Bay. But residents interviewed said they do not know about this plan saying “What will happen to us (farmers) if our land will be converted? What we want is our land that we can till.”

People’s rights were further violated in the course of government’s efforts to maintain control over the disputed lands. The Philippine Constabulary was deployed to threaten and displace affected residents under then President Marcos. At present, rights violations continue – private and state security forces are deployed to the community; homes are demolished; farmers remain poor; and basic social services are lacking.

The YKR hired affected residents to do menial jobs for the ranch. But there are only 30 regular workers currently employed, of which 11 are cowboys, and 9 *job orders*.

The poverty and landlessness have made peasants in other provinces vulnerable to deception such as that of Pesante- Pilipinas, an affiliate of UNORKA, ran by Evangeline “Vangi” G. Mendoza and clique.

Pesante- Pilipinas took advantage of the impoverished and desperate conditions of the affected peasants. They were recruited and deceived by this pseudo peasant group who extorted money through annual renewal of membership fees, monthly dues, legal fees and collections for operational expenses of their organization. Villagers narrated that Pesante-Pilipinas promise them that the money collected from them would assure their security from the land. Nothing, however, materialized from their promises.

Those who are now residing in Coron and Busuanga are referred to as “floating sitios” or informal settlers. As a result, they are deprived of basic social services. They were given false hopes that under the bogus Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), land would be awarded to them.

Even before YKR, the people are already tilling and cultivating the disputed land. Affected families were relatively self-sufficient. But the land grabbing case has marginalized them.

Women bear the brunt of making ends meet. Apart from their domestic errands, they augment their meager income by taking odd jobs.

In Paseco, residents said there are many “ghost beneficiaries” of CARP. They were also assigned to the land they would receive through “table mapping,” which sows confusion and rift among farmer-beneficiaries.

There are 11 companies whose respective contracts with Philippine Forest Corporation were canceled. But one corporation, Skykes Aggregates, remains. Another company, Goat Industries, also began operation sometime in 2004 but no government document could provide the team who granted permission for its operation and who the owner is.

The original settlers such as the Tagbanua, Calamianes and Cuyonin were all the more displaced due to the land grabbing.

Most of the residents of affected communities, especially those who have been tilling the land before YKR came, returned to the disputed land due to the lack of livelihood in the resettlement areas, where lands are hardly suitable for agriculture. They also cited that they have decided to return and till the lands again as YKR has left it idle.

Analysis and Conclusion

The NFFSM team concluded that this is a state-sponsored massive land grabbing case against the people of Coron and Busuanga. From Marcos' Presidential Decree No. 27 to the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), which was first implemented under President Corazon Aquino, the affected residents in Coron and Busuanga remained landless and poor.

The government perpetuated their monopolistic control over the disputed land through schemes such as laws and policies, among others, to ensure that the land would not be distributed to the people. As a result, only the government, in partnership with private corporations and bureaucrat capitalists, reaped and plundered the resources.

The abolition of the Philippine Forest Corporation was President Aquino's political maneuver to cover up and deceive the people of the government's inherent corrupt practices. The Forest Management Bureau, which subsumed the responsibilities of Phil Forest, the remnants of public private partnership remains.

Of the 11 contracts entered to by the Phil Forest, only one, the Skykes Aggreventures, continued to operate. There is also a certain "Goat Industries," which, according to the estimate of an affected resident, would cover some 600 hectares, does not have any paper trail at all.

The mandate of the Bureau of Animal Industry and Busuanga Breeding Experimental Station was not fulfilled as it failed to provide due assistance to the development of livelihoods of the people. Instead, it paved the way for the gradual decrease in the number of livestock animals owned by government agency.

In fact, when YKR acquired the lands, residents were forced to sell the livestock animals, particularly cows and water buffalos, citing that they now have no use for it as they do not have lands to till. If there is someone who benefited and profited from the project, it was the big agribusinesses, pharmaceutical companies, consultants hired from abroad, among others.

The deployment of state security forces in the affected communities is a clear message to further suppress the people's rights to land, life and resistance.

Under Marcos dictatorship, Yulo King Ranch pacified the resistance of the people by hiring, bribing and providing favors and resources to some affected residents. People were made to believe that they were justly compensated for the improvements of the land but the fact finding mission proved otherwise as any amount of compensation for the so-called improvements could not replace the economic sustainability of owning and tilling the land.

The disputed land, if distributed and cultivated, could ensure food security, economic sustainability and self-sufficiency not only for the people of Coron and Busuanga but also to the entire country.

Recommendations

1. For the affected residents,
 - a. To form an organization or alliance that would genuinely represent the broad and strong demands of the people to give back the lands to the tillers.
 - b. To continue to expose the scam orchestrated by Pesante-Pilipinas/Unorka led by Evanagline “Vangi” Mendoza and her cohorts.
2. For concerned government agencies,
 - a. To hold rights violators, both private and state security forces, accountable for the harassments perpetrated against the residents.
 - b. To provide agricultural subsidies and provisions for farmers, such as organic seeds (palay and vegetable), organic fertilizers, and irrigation facilities, to help them make their lands more productive.
3. For lawmakers,
 - a. To conduct a house inquiry in aid of legislation to investigate the involvement of the Philippine Forest Corporation in the plight of the affected residents.
 - b. To conduct an inquiry on the human rights violations committed by private security guards and state security forces against the affected residents of the Yulo King Ranch.
 - c. To pass House Bill 252 or the Genuine Agrarian Reform Bill (GARB) that seeks to break the monopoly of lands of big landlords. GARB is pushing for the nationalization of all agricultural lands and its subsequent free distribution to landless tillers.
4. For the international community to pressure the Philippine government to look into the conditions of the affected residents of Yulo King Ranch and to urge it to act accordingly to their favor. #

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