

Initial Findings of Tanggol Magsasaka's Fact-Finding Mission February 19 to 20, 2020

Tanggol Magsasaka, a broad platform of individuals and organizations that advocate the general upliftment of lives of rural-based sectors, held a fact-finding mission in Taytay, Palawan last February 19 and 20, 2020. The group conducted several interviews and focus group discussions in isolated poverty-stricken areas, namely the island barangay of Paly and the coastal barangay of Poblacion. Recent reports indicate that these barangays also have heavy military presence.

I. General Context

Paly's total population is 2,800 and all of its residents are fisherfolk. Life is generally hard. Access to water and electricity is close to nil and there is very limited access to healthcare and government infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, workers, farmers, and fisherfolk make up the bulk of Poblacion's populace. Although life is not as bad as in Paly, they are largely affected by the presence of the 400-hectare bamboo plantation of Guevent Investments Development Corporation (GIDC) as this has endangered their right to land and livelihood.

As a response to the dire situation and in order to advance their welfare, organizations were formed and strengthened. In Paly, a local chapter of PAMALAKAYA, a national federation of small fisherfolk in the Philippines, was established in 2015, and were part of the successful campaigns against excessive fees such as the imposition of PhP 350 for "pana", thus PhP 1,400 for usually 4 pieces being used per boat in 2016. PAMALAKAYA members in Paly and Palawan also pushed for the suspension of the one-year closed season last year. In 2018, Pinagkaisang Lakas ng mga Okupante, Residente, Manggagawa, Magsasaka, at Mangingisda sa Taytay (PLORMM) based in Poblacion, lobbied at the House of Representatives against the displacement of farmers and residents from the 1,265-hectare Pujalte Estate. The residents were being forcibly displaced so that GIDC can use the land for its operations. It is quite unfortunate that these people's organizations have become victims of red-tagging as a general reprisal for their efforts.

Palawan's Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflicts (TF-ELCAC), a policy framework that seeks to implement Duterte's EO 70 and Joint Campaign Plan Kapanatagan locally, has served as a blanket authorization for authorities to baselessly accuse local leaders of being rebels, arrest citizens without due process, and permit the presence of state forces in these barangays and in many other areas in Palawan. Since 2018, the elements of the Philippine Marines have been billeted in both barangays resulting in de facto martial law.

II. General Findings

The presence of the military in these depressed areas has precipitated several cases of threats, harassment, and intimidation towards the residents, especially to the members and leaders of the aforementioned organizations. In Paly, at least 18 individuals were victims of false allegations and various forms of threats and intimidation by the 3rd Marine Brigade, bivouacked in the island barangay's town hall. The people's right to organize is also restricted, through certain strategic tactics, such as the creation an entirely different organization spearheaded by the barangay officials, and through outright harassment of members and leaders of the red-tagged organization. Eventually, the team learned that the formation of the new fisherfolk organization was prodded by the municipal government.

Aside from the direct harassment of members and leaders, military sponsored campaigns and activities such as Civil Military Operations (CMO) in schools have affected the psycho-social welfare of

the students and children; several activities and fora were conducted, in line with TF-ELCAC's framework that promotes the vilification of local progressive organizations, which in most cases their parents are part of.

The cases in PLORMM mostly constitute of forced surrenders and incessant harassment. Led by the 413th Marine Brigade making rounds on people's homes with ready-made affidavits to be signed by the members of PLORMM, with the purpose of "clearing their names". Those who refused to sign were continuously threatened with statements that insinuate the future involvement of family members. This has fomented a coercive environment that alludes to the endangerment of lives, not only to the members, but also extending to their kin. A total of 17 cases were recorded for the barangay.

The fear sowed within the hearts of the marginalized led to the effective dismantling of organizations that promote the interests of the marginalized sector. This opens up space for private entities to pursue their economic agenda. As per the PLORMM members, their needs and rights were not taken into account in this development.

III. Analysis and Recommendations

General trends from the data gathered suggest that people in both barangays are seeking alternative sources of income to alleviate their situation. This can be addressed by agro-economic projects to ensure daily sustenance.

Through TF-ELCAC, varying degrees of collusion between state forces and local authorities were observed. In Paly, the mere presence of the Philippine Marines within the vicinity of the Barangay Hall and their influence on the decisions of the Barangay Captain has propelled them to a position of authority exceeding that of the Barangay Captain. In terms of impact, this has restricted free movement of the fisherfolk. Taytay LGU's direct partnership with GIDC has resulted in the prioritization of business interests over the rights of resident farmers and fisherfolk.

Testimonials and narratives point to the state armed forces' presence as an overwhelming factor that hinders them from exercising their right to livelihood and the full enjoyment of human rights. Baseless allegations connecting PAMALAKAYA to the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the New People's Army (NPA) have compromised the security of the members and everyone else on the island. Because they cannot consult among themselves to come up with a consolidated decision on their welfare, they have become vulnerable to the economic policies of the LGU and the provincial government. One interviewee who refused to disclose her identity explained that some traders are advised against procuring their products. This has caused additional loss to their already meager household income.

PLORMMM in Poblacion faces a similar situation. With the arrest of their chairperson, Norlie Bernabe, on trumped up murder charges that emerged from the organization's affiliation with Anakpawis Partylist in 2019, GIDC has been assured of a smoother takeover over the residents' landholdings.

Tanggol Magsasaka recommends the government to recognize people's organizations as legitimate actors that perform their roles to uphold public interest. It is also recommended for the government to support and strengthen community organizations such as PAMALAKAYA and PLORMM because they enable people to act and move to gain what is rightfully theirs. More importantly, the authorities should implement programs that would address the needs of the people, improve their situation, and guarantee the enjoyment of the fruits of their labor.

IV. Ways forward

General findings suggest that these recent cases of militarization in isolated rural areas that directly affect the already poor conditions and the livelihoods of the marginalized sectors have stunted their path towards holistic development.

From the results of the fact-finding mission, organizations that form Tanggol Magsasaka will endeavor to call on:

1. The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and other concerned government agencies to review and validate the findings of the fact-finding team, as well as conduct an on-site inspection of the offices to certify said spaces as legal and official organizational offices;
2. The CHR to check the processes conducted by military units in said areas, particularly the use of blanket affidavits, red-tagging, and use of coercive circumstances to urge individuals to sign; and,
3. Review the impact of the implementation of Palawan's Provincial TF-ELCAC, particularly on the people's freedom of association, freedom of expression and right to organize.

Twelve organizations from Asia, Africa, and WANA (West Asia and North Africa) have endorsed the petition initiated by an international formation of advocates of the right to food calling out the repression experienced by fisherfolks and farmers in Palawan and the rest of the nation.

Tanggol Magsasaka also calls on all those concerned to raise the problem to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) for the conduct of an independent and impartial investigation.#

Reference:

Eddie Billiones
Spokesperson
0915 955 5198