

Filipino farmers commit to 10 days of running and hunger strike to protest losing their land

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Hacienda Luisita and Hacienda Bacan

To expose the government's failure to make good on its promises of land distribution, farmers from the Arroyo lands in Negros Occidental and others commenced 10 days of running on Monday, 1 December 2008. A few others also began an indefinite hunger strike.

After completing a six-kilometre run from inside Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac, Fr Robert Reyes, a staff member of the Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), and several other farmers joined other farmers in Munos, Quezon City to continue running. Fr Robert and the farmers running with him aim to complete 157 kilometres in ten days, at around 15 kilometres a day.

The number of kilometres represents the hectares of land owned by Jose Miguel Arroyo, husband of the Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, which has yet to be awarded to the farmer beneficiaries of Hacienda Bacan, Isabela, Negros Occidental.

According to President Gloria Arroyo's promise in May 2008, all land under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Programme (CARP), including her husband's, would be distributed to farmers.

In reality, Task Force Mapalad (TFM) has found that political interference and pressure upon government agencies processing farmers' claim applications is causing delays. Time is particularly critical as the implementation of CARP is due to expire on December 31.

Although the 67 farmer beneficiaries have already completed all the requirements of claiming Arroyo's property, the public officials and government agencies responsible for processing their applications are either reluctant or deliberately refusing to perform their duties.

The Registry of Deeds (ROD) in Bacolod City for instance, refuses to transfer the Certificate of Title to the name of Republic of the Philippines from the Rivulet Agro-Industrial Corporation—the company claiming ownership of Hacienda Bacan—which is required for the farmers to register their Certificate of Landownership Award (CLOA).

The ROD justifies its refusal claiming that it could not facilitate the issuance of the transfer because of the annotation of "Declaration of Trust" in favor of the president's husband, Jose Miguel Arroyo, and that the Certificate of Deposit that was issued by the Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP) as payment for the property is still under the name of Rivulet.

Under the CARP, the LBP is obliged to pay the owners of land covered by the programme on behalf of the farmers. Despite 42 million pesos having been paid for the property, the farmers cannot process their CLOA due to the ROD's refusal.

The run from the Hacienda Luisita—owned by the family of former President Corazon Aquino—thus symbolizes how the land distribution programme has been undermined from its very enactment. While the farmers inside Hacienda Luisita are recognized as owners of the land, their authority and the benefits

they get from the land is meager. They are stock holders and get a small percentage from the Hacienda's profit under the Stock Distribution Option (SDO), but are not actually tilling their own lands. Several farmers have in fact died in attempting to reclaim their land.

Fr Robert and the other runners held a short prayer before beginning their run. The farmers carried sugarcane stalks from the Hacienda Luisita as well as banners demanding the Arroyo family to give their lands to them. Utterly exhausted, they completed their run for the day at the head office of the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) in Quezon City. [photo 1]

Waiting in front of the DAR office were eight more farmers from the Arroyo land, one of whom was a woman, who commenced their indefinite hunger strike. Three of the farmers shaved their heads to symbolically protest against their plight. [photo 2]

A few of these farmers have only recently been released from detention after being detained last week for holding a peaceful protest in front of the Land Registration Authority (LRA), whom they asked to intervene into the registration of their land.

Under the law, the LRA has authority over the registration of lands. The farmers were forced to pressure the LRA after the Registry of Deeds in Bacolod refused to transfer ownership of the land from the Arroyos to the farmers.

Law reform and extension

Fr Robert Reyes, known in the Philippines as the 'running priest', held a solo protest inside the Philippine Congress in Quezon City on December 2, calling upon legislators to consider as a priority, the extension of the land reform law.

Before he resumed his daily 15-kilometre run together with farmers, Fr Robert Reyes went inside the Congress' main lobby where he offered his daily prayer for the farmers and reaffirmed their demand that the bill seeking an extension and reform of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) be passed promptly before the year's end.

There are serious concerns that if a law is not passed by the end of the year, landless farmers will be left hanging, while the beneficiaries under the CARP will have no other means or legal remedies to seek ownership of the lands they till.

Although the implementation of the law at present is weak and ineffective, not having any legal obligations on the part of the Department of Agrarian Reform—the agency responsible for the land distribution programme—will make the pursuit of land reform even more difficult. As it is, two decades after the land reform law took effect thousands of hectares of land have failed to be awarded to farmers.

According to Task Force Mapalad, in Negros Occidental alone, the claims of a total of 11,239 hectares of land covering 134 haciendas by about 5,731 farmer beneficiaries remain pending at all levels of the CARP process. This includes the 157 hectares of land owned by President Arroyo's husband in Isabela.

Several farmers were waiting for Reyes at the gate outside the Congress compound, from where they resumed their run towards the head office of the DAR. One of those joining the run was Reiko Sembad, a 22-year-old student of Cultural and Tourism Studies from a university in Tokyo. Reiko, like other farmers who joined the run, did not mind the scorching heat and exhaustion during the run. Some of the farmers, including the elderly, were wearing flip tops and trousers, rather than any running gear. Their endurance and willingness to complete the run was moving. [photo3]

In the afternoon, Reyes held a mass inside the farmers' makeshift tents, which had been in front of the DAR over the past few weeks. Eight farmers from the Arroyo lands who are holding an indefinite hunger strike are also staying in those tents.

Hacienda Yulo

On their third day of running, farmers of two of the country's most influential landlords—the Arroyos and the Yulos—sought urgent intervention from members of the Senate and the House of Representatives to address their desperate plight.

Apart from the farmers in Hacienda Bacan in Isabela, Negros Occidental—which is owned by President Arroyo's husband, Jose Miguel—farmers from Hacienda Yulo in Laguna province, have also been deprived from owning the land they cultivate.

Of the 7,100 hectares of land in Hacienda Yulo, about 3,256 are being claimed by farmers whose ancestors have been occupying and cultivating the land since 1905. It was first given to the Madrigal family during the Spanish colonization, and was later transferred to Jose Miguel Yulo, whose family is the present owner.

At least 1,354 farmer beneficiaries are seeking ownership to the land. As early as the 1960s, the ancestors of the present claimants began their fight for ownership. In 1990, three years after the CARP was made into law, the farmer beneficiaries applied for inclusion in land distribution under the CARP. Three years later, the land was declared exempt from the CARP, on the pretext that it is industrial and commercial land.

Needless to say, the land conversion process was highly questionable. The municipal mayor at the time, Jesus Miguel Yulo—son of the landowner—and the zoning administrator, who also had connections with the Yulos, deliberately abused their authority. They used their influence to convert the contested land to ensure it would be exempted from distribution.

Since then, the land has been idle, used for neither industrial nor commercial purposes. The municipal government of Calamba has even issued a certification affirming that the land has been idle. Although this certification was submitted to the DAR, it reiterated its previous decision exempting the land for distribution. The farmers filed a petition seeking to revoke the land classification in 2006, which remains pending.

In 2007, the Yulos instead offered to distribute home-lots that measure about 150 square meters, to each beneficiary, as well as cash worth PHP13,000 (USD 263), supposedly as “disturbance compensation”. The farmers have refused the offer; as one farmer said, what they need is not home-lots, but land to farm and somewhere they can build their homes and earn a livelihood.

To date, the farmer's petition asking the DAR to reconsider its earlier decision is not showing any progress. This was the issue they ran 7-kilometres with on December 3, from the head office of the DAR towards the House of Representatives.

After that run was completed, a separate run by farmers from the Arroyo land took place, from the Baclaran Church in Coastal Road towards the Senate building. After the farmers reached the Senate led by Fr Robert Reyes, some of them also joined the Senate committee hearing on the Arroyo land. The Senate's committee on agrarian reform was conducting an inquiry, in aid of legislation, as to why the farmers in Negros Occidental have not been able to acquire the land under the CARP. However, the

committee failed to come out with a concrete resolution to immediately ensure the speedy distribution of land.

Physical cost of protests

Three days of running and hunger strike was physically costly to some of the farmers. One of the eight farmers on hunger strike, 22-year-old Irene Celis, had to be taken to the nearby East Avenue Medical Center on December 4, after she fell ill. Before she was taken to hospital she told her colleagues that she was feeling weak, dizzy and her head was aching, while tightly holding her stomach. She had only water and no food over the past three days. [photo 4]

Irene's colleagues and Fr Robert took her to the hospital for treatment. She was diagnosed to have suffered from dehydration and her sugar count was low.

Irene is the daughter of Jose Celis, one of the farmer beneficiaries of the Arroyo land. She was also one of those 30 farmers arrested and briefly detained at a police station in Kamuning, Quezon City on November 27, for holding a protest at the LRA.

Irene's brief detention and the suffering her sickly father had to endure prompted her to take part in the indefinite hunger strike. Since her sickly father could not be physically present in Manila, she took this on in his stead. Her colleagues were reluctant to let her join the hunger strike as she had a fever some days after being released from detention, but Irene nevertheless decided to carry on. She is the youngest individual and the only woman in the group.

Some of the other farmers who had been running since December 1 had to reconsider joining the run on the fourth day. Farmers from UNORKA, particularly the elderly, decided not to join as some of them began to suffer severe muscle pain, with their legs swelling and becoming numb. While farmers from TFM were ready to resume running, they had to reconsider due to concerns that their health may deteriorate if not given a day rest. Both TFM and UNORKA are peoples' groups assisting farmers in their fight for land ownership under the CARP.

In addition, heavy downpours prevented the overly exhausted farmers from resuming their run.

Fr Robert pledged to complete the run of 157-kilometres even if the farmers would be not able to join him. "I understand what farmers had to endure because they are used to working hard at farms and not to run on streets. However, I have promised to complete the 157 kilometres even if it means completing it in Hong Kong," Reyes said.

Farmers take grievances to the heart of regime's power

To once again draw attention to their plight, farmers from the Arroyo lands went to the presidential palace on December 5, to submit a letter to the president.

Signed by eight farmers on hunger strike—Jose Rodito Angeles and Saletiano of Hacienda Grande; Rogelio Salva, Alex and Irene Celis of Hacienda Bacan; and Romeo Pidoy, Nilo and Bonifacio Alzona of Hacienda Paraiso—the letter called upon President Arroyo to fulfil her pledge to redistribute the Arroyo property to landless farmers. Apart from the Hacienda Bacan owned by the president's husband, Jose Miguel Arroyo, his uncle Antonio Arroyo owns the 197-hectare Hacienda Grande in La Castellana, and a 60-hectare plot at Hacienda Paraiso, La Carlota City.

Jose Rodito Angeles, one of the 25 petitioners of the Hacienda Grande and president of Task Force Mapalad, renewed the farmers' pleas to the government for the immediate valuation of Haciendas Grande and Paraiso. The assessment of the property by the Land Bank of the Philippines would determine the cost to be paid to the owner by the government, on behalf of the farmers. Under the CARP, transfer of title or ownership from private individuals to the Philippine government can only be made after the LBP completes its valuation. Once the procedures are completed, the Department of Agrarian Reform would then issue a Certificate of Land Ownership Award to farmers.

While the valuation of Haciendas Grande and Paraiso are delayed, the distribution of the Arroyo land remains in a deadlock.

While carrying the letter from the farmers to the Office of the President, AHRC staff Fr Robert Reyes and Danilo Reyes were initially prevented by the Presidential Security Guard (PSG) from entering the palace. The guards also attempted to arrest Danilo for taking photographs of Robert running. Fr Robert was to commence his daily 15 kilometre run inside one of the palace gates, but was stopped by the PSG, on the pretext that the area had been restricted. The farmers accompanying him were perceived as security threats and barred from entering the gate. [photo 5]

While the AHRC staff were inside the palace, the farmers—those on hunger strike and those who had been running daily—held a small demonstration outside and waited until the letter was officially received. [photo 6]

Refusing to let Fr Robert and Danilo enter the palace records office, the PSG instructed a palace staff member to receive the letter at a makeshift tent beside the road, which Fr Robert objected to. Had Secretary Silvestre Bello, one of the president's Cabinet secretaries not intervened by accompanying Robert to the palace's record section, the receipt of the letter would not have been officially recorded.

In their letter to the president, the farmers wrote, "We are hoping for your understanding and strong conviction that you would fulfil what you have promised [to us]. If you will, we are seeking for a dialogue with you."

Afterwards, Secretary Bello held a short discussion with the farmers and promised he would arrange a dialogue between them and President Arroyo. Secretary Bello also urged the farmers to consider lifting their hunger strike, but they refused to do so until their needs were met.

Fr Robert was then joined by the farmers for a short run from the palace gate towards the nearby San Sebastian Church, outside which they offered prayers.

Urban poor share similar plight in land struggle

The place where they dwell and eke out a subsistence living may be different, but the urban poor and rural farmers share the same struggle: to own a plot of land, build a decent house and earn a livelihood.

Like the farmers in Haciendas Bacan, Grande and Paraiso in Negros Occidental and Hacienda Yulo in Laguna, the urban poor in Baseco compound in Tondo, Manila are likewise struggling for land ownership in the city.

Driven by the lack of opportunities in the countryside, some of those hoping for a better life in the metropolis often end up living in urban slums. Their makeshift houses are often targeted for violent demolition, which routinely occur without prior warning or relocation.

Even though the 57-hectare Baseco compound is government property, the people living there have never owned the land their houses stand on. According to a local group, at least 47,000 families have been occupying this land, a reclaimed part of Manila Bay. These families live with the constant fear of demolition and subsequent loss of livelihood.

The residents are also under constant threat of fire and other natural disasters due to congestion. In January 2004, about 20,000 families lost their homes when about 2,500 structures were burnt to the ground. Some of the families rebuilt their homes for the third or fourth times.

To highlight their plight, at least 15 residents, mostly women, on December 6, joined the farmers in a two-hour run from the Baseco compound, Manila to the DAR office in Quezon, even though they lacked both preparation and training. The residents stopped occasionally and rode in the jeep convoy accompanying the runners to get a few minutes rest, before running again. [photo 7]

At the DAR, the residents met the farmers on hunger strike. They shared their thoughts and expressed their solidarity with the farmers, whose health conditions were visibly weakening as they continued on the sixth day of their hunger strike. One of the residents from the Baseco compound cried as she reflected on the residents' and farmers' struggle to own land. [photo 8]

A symbolic march

After a day of recuperation, on December 8 the farmers marched for approximately four hours with a pushcart—'Kariton ni Maria' ('Mary's pushcart', symbolizing poverty)—from around 10:30am to 2:30pm. Their route began at the DAR office, from where they went to the Department of Environmental and Natural Resources (DENR), the Department of Agriculture, the Land Registration Authority, the Mendiola bridge, and finally to the Manila Cathedral. [photo 9]

Each place along the route has significance for the farmers' struggle for land:

The DENR is responsible for issuing Environmental Compliance Certificates (ECC) to corporations and other bodies. Many corporations operating factories and community-based forest management strategies work without any certificates however, adversely affecting the rights and livelihoods of indigenous peoples. Numerous indigenous communities have been displaced from their traditional homelands by such corporations.

The Department of Agriculture is obliged to provide assistance to farmers, both technical and financial. This includes small loans/grants and the provision of fertilizers.

The Mendiola bridge is near the presidential palace and is generally closed to protest. In 1987, the bridge was the site of the Mendiola massacre, where a group of farmers were shot while demanding the enactment of a land redistribution law. Since then, the bridge is seen as a historical site for farmers' struggles. Upon reaching the bridge, Fr Robert and the farmers offered prayers there. [photos 10 & 11]

At the Manila Cathedral, the group was met by some bishops, and mass was said together in the afternoon. The farmers wished to urge the clergy to take an active interest in their plight, as well as that of other vulnerable and needy groups in the country.

Spirit of hope

Tuesday, December 9, was a disheartening day. Two of the farmers on hunger strike were taken to the hospital. Sources close to the office of the president informed the AHRC staff and the farmers that it was

likely that their demands regarding the Arroyo land would not be met. At a dialogue on Monday, the head of the LRA appeared to take the position of legal counsel for the Arroyos, and refused to register the land.

Sensing this struggle may take longer than anticipated, Fr Robert convinced the farmers on hunger strike to at least drink some malunggay (nutritional leafy vegetable) soup.

The farmers however, showed no signs of losing hope. At the same time, they were quite ready to die for their cause. Many of them feel they have nothing else to live for. They have no land, no employment, no home. Some of them are also under constant harassment due to their vocal fight for their rights.

International human rights day

To mark December 10, international human rights day, Fr Robert and the farmers ran from the DAR to the House of Representatives, and marched back along the same route. They continued to demand for the extension of the CARP and the redistribution of the Arroyo lands. The House of Representatives' current session is ongoing until December 17, and the farmers are desperate to ensure that the extension of CARP is tabled before the session ends. They plan to continue indefinitely with their hunger strike, until their demands are met.