

Philippine president proposes to evict 500,000 slum residents from Manila

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Philippine President Aquino, speaking in Jakarta on Saturday, revealed a plan to relocate half a million squatters from Manila to rural areas throughout the Philippines in the coming months. This plan aims to simultaneously clear urban land for private developers and to stem the mounting threat of a food crisis. Inevitably there will be violent confrontations.

Metro Manila has an estimated population of 12 million. The dense, congested urban sprawl spreads beyond its boundaries, however. The single urban unit known as Greater Manila contains around 20 million people. There are an estimated 3 to 4 million squatters in Metro Manila alone.

Vast shantytowns cover the map of the city with a patchwork of dirt and poverty and disease. They are found crowded along rail lines and teeter precariously over filthy canals or *esteros*. Large cemeteries overflow with living inhabitants, veritable cities formed among the tombstones. Mausoleums designed to house the bones of the rich now also house whole families of the poor.

The homes are made of plywood scraps, corrugated tin roofs, and plastic tarpaulin. The materials are taken from wherever they can be found. When advertisers put up polyethylene banners proclaiming the virtues of Coke, McDonalds or skin whitening soap along the highways of Manila, they place strategic slits throughout the material so that no one will be tempted to take it and turn it into a shelter for their family.

The crowded communities often depend for their drinking water upon illegal taps into the city's water supply. Long lines form in the early morning, as people with buckets and recycled mineral water bottles take their share from the leaking pipes. Some areas are fortunate enough to have a community toilet and lines form here as well. Shantytowns formed along *esteros* dispose of their waste in the water.

Government warnings as routine and humdrum as traffic signs stand at the entrance to the cramped, fetid alleyways that enter the shantytowns, stating "Leptospirosis kills." The disease is caused by a bacteria in rat urine carried in floodwater. Hundreds die from it every year. The garbage clogged drains of the city back up every year, and the floodwaters enter their homes.

Yet, these are homes. Many squatter families have been living in the same location for generations. Children were born here and grandchildren. While the alleyways outside may be muddy and cramped, their floors are neatly swept. A fading picture of the Swiss Alps or of a two-story American home, carefully torn from a decade-old calendar can be found neatly hung on the wall.

Many of the children in these homes leave each day in carefully pressed, if threadbare, school uniforms. After an elementary education, many of them will join their parents in constant, but informal employment. They run small stores, carry goods in the market, transport passengers in bicycles with sidecars, sell fried squidballs, survive. Some work in factories, or become salesgirls in malls. The National Statistics Office lists every one of them as fully employed.

But the land that they sit on is valuable. It is always within eyeshot of high rises, and the glint of the tinted windows of commerce. The government, at the behest of real estate developers and mall owners, has evicted shantytown neighborhoods again and again. Each eviction has been violent.

On April 28, at the order of Vice President Jejomar Binay, 2,000 residents of the Laperal shantytown in Guadalupe, Metro Manila were evicted. The residents formed barricades. The police used truncheons, tear gas, and water hoses to remove them. The residents threw rocks and Molotov cocktails. Their homes were burned to the ground and others razed with a backhoe. In March during an eviction in San

Juan, the government posted snipers on nearby rooftops, their rifles trained on the workers, aged, women and children below.

These are evictions of thousands. Aquino plans to ‘relocate’ 500,000.

The president proposes to lease to each evicted family two hectares of land in the rural Philippines. This is cynically depicted as being “pro-poor” and is presented as an effort to increase the Philippines food production. It will do nothing of the sort.

Where will this land come from? Aquino proudly states that the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) have located 1.5 million hectares that can be used for this program. The Philippines has some of the most densely populated rural land in the world. Even the most inhospitable of soils is used to farm root crops, or *cogon* grass to roof huts. The land that the DENR proposes for Aquino’s scheme is already occupied—by rural squatters.

Much of this land will be that covered by the pyroclastic ash and lahar from the eruption of the 1991 Mount Pinatubo. Tufts of hardy *talahib* grass grow, but nothing else. Yet, even here rural squatters eke out an existence growing *kamote*, sweet potato.

What homes wait for these displaced squatters? They are being flung onto undeveloped, but occupied land and told to make a living for themselves. If they fail by December, Aquino says, they will not be allowed to stay on the land. The land, he says, is for farming. Where they will go if the government thrusts them off of their new land is unanswered.

These are not farmers who are being relocated out of the city. These are long time urban dwellers. Relocating a janitor or a garbage recycler to the rural Philippines does not make him a rice farmer. Even if Aquino’s government provided seed, training, and irrigated land, there is no way that even a sizable minority of the displaced families would succeed in producing an adequate harvest—by December. And Aquino has made no allotment for any of this. What he proposes will only result in mass hunger and possibly starvation.

Aquino’s plan has received the most callous of backing in the Senate from his ally Senator Pangilinan, who stated that this proposal would create “farm-’treneurs” and would support Philippine farmers who were “becoming an

endangered species.”

All of this is coming from a president whose family owns the vast 6,500 hectare Hacienda Luisita and has, through dishonesty, machination, and threat of violence, managed to avoid the application of land reform law to their holdings. The Aquino land is farmed for sugar. Sugar workers are some of the most exploited of rural labor in the world, their conditions are just shy of slavery. Other sections of his land house a mall, complete with Starbucks, McDonalds, and multiple cinemas. Hacienda Luisita operates factories for Phelps Dodge, Sanyo, and International Wiring Systems.

The Philippine government undertook such a mass relocation of the population once before. In the 1950s, under President Magsaysay and at the behest of the Edward Gears Lansdale of the CIA, peasants were relocated from the northern island of Luzon to the southern island of Mindanao. Magsaysay was attempting to defuse the ongoing Huk rebellion through the promise of land to the landless peasants of Luzon. He referred to Mindanao as the “promised land.” Just as with Aquino’s proposal, the land promised was not vacant. Hundreds of thousands of Muslim residents were evicted from their ancestral lands to make way for Christian peasants relocated by Magsaysay. The Huk rebellion slowly died out, but a violent Muslim separatist movement was born in the south. That conflict still rages.

The struggle against eviction from their homes by long time urban residents is an international one. The Rajapakse government in Sri Lanka has engaged in the eviction of 75,000 families from the slums of Colombo. Urban developers are keen to get their hands on the land, and like Aquino he does their bidding. The evocative photos taken by organizers of the Socialist Equality Party in Colombo could easily be mistaken for shantytowns in Manila. The plight of the working people affected is an international one, and so is their struggle.



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