

Scores injured, arrested in housing demolition in the Philippines

Joseph Santolan
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Four hundred police and demolition crew members violently dispersed the long-time residents of Barangay Corazon de Jesus in San Juan, Metro Manila on January 11. Dozens were injured as the police fired tear gas and water cannons, dismantled the barricades built by the community in defense of their homes, cordoned off the residents in an alleyway and the beat them with truncheons.

Three hundred families lost their homes, as the wrecking crews tore down hollow block walls and corrugated metal roofs to make way for the construction of government buildings and commercial development. The demolition is part of the eviction and forcible relocation of the Manila poor and working class carried out by the Philippine state on behalf of real estate developers.

The residents of Corazon de Jesus had been living on the disputed land for several decades. Their homes, while poor, bore all the marks of long-time residency: plastic framed family photos lined the walls here; an academic award earned by a third grader was hung by proud parents there. The tear gas canisters were fired onto a street that housed a small community store, a family bakery that sold hot *pan-de-sal* in the morning to departing workers, and a neighborhood repair shop.

San Juan is a microcosm of inequality. Boutique shops and gourmet restaurants line Wilson Street and the neighborhood surrounding Greenhills Shopping Center. Glitzy high-rise condominiums and gated communities sit adjacent to the elite prep school of La Salle. Less than three kilometers distant are the cramped homes of Corazon de Jesus, and the shanty-lined banks of the *estero* canals that wind under N.

Domingo Avenue.

San Juan is the political turf of former Philippine President Joseph ‘Erap’ Estrada. His mistress is mayor; his wife was a senator until 2007; his son, a congressman, and another son, a senator. The San Juan city hall has a helipad for the family’s use. The Estradas have another helipad near the San Juan shopping and dining district. The streets near the demolished community of Corazon de Jesus were lined with pro-Estrada graffiti, the handiwork of unemployed youth paid by the family to tag buildings with phrases about the “revolution” of the poor for Erap.

San Juan’s real estate boom and commercial development was made possible by the repeated forcible eviction of poor communities carried out by city government under the control of the Estrada family.

Real estate prices in Manila are skyrocketing. Commercial and high-end residential developments are being constructed across the city. The working class residents are being forcibly shunted onto Metro Manila’s hinterlands. The state is carrying out the massive relocation of ‘undesirable’ communities seated upon desirable land.

One of the primary relocation sites is Montalban, Rizal. It houses over 50,000 families in slapdash constructions several hours distant from the Manila. A crowded infirmary provides medical services twice a week. The relocation site is on the Marikina floodplain, which two years ago saw the entire community flooded to the roofs.

The human cost of the forcible relocation of hundreds of thousands of people is staggering. Children removed from their schools. Families and friendships severed. Workers moved hours away from their jobs. A construction worker whose home was demolished at Barangay Corazon de Jesus on Wednesday stated that he made 350 pesos (\$US7.90) a day, adding: “If I have to commute from Montalban, my entire pay will be eaten.”

A sizeable number of those forced out of the city are broken by the experience, and suffer from mental illness. The Montalban relocation site is sometimes referred to as ‘Mental-ban.’

Even here on the cramped, unwanted floodplain, capitalism does not miss the opportunity for profit and predation. Five-star hotels in the business district of Makati dispose of a portion of their garbage through contractors who truck the food that was left on the plates of the wealthy and the residual bars of soap taken from the showers of tourists, and sell them in Montalban. Residents gather on a weekly basis for the unloading of the hotel trucks, and bidding and bartering ensues. The food is recooked and sold in street-side canteens; the soap is reused.

The Montalban relocation site is a National Housing Authority (NHA) project under the control of President Benigno Aquino. Aquino has not only been complicit in the destruction of homes and the relocations of tens of thousands of the poor, he has been the principal architect. In May 2011, Aquino called for the removal of 500,000 of the urban poor from Manila to make way for the commercial development of the city.

The demolition of a neighborhood, the destruction of decades of toil and care, the uprooting of the interconnected lives of a working-class community follows a well-worn and familiar pattern. The city government receives bids for the land from a prospective real estate developer. The state offers to relocate the residents. They refuse. The offer is repeated with the threat of police force. The developer, with the collusion of the state, sends in armed thugs, who burn some of the homes. Some of the residents capitulate and move out of the city. Most stay.

At this point the entire neighborhood may mysteriously suffer a fire that reduces the community to cinders and kills several occupants. This happens with numbing regularity, and is scantily mentioned in one paragraph of the Metro section of the local paper. In the 1990s, the entire San Juan public market went up in flames, when mayor, now senator, Jinggoy Estrada could not persuade the stall owners to vacate. A mall now sits in its stead.

If, however, the occupied land sits adjacent to valuable existing real estate, as Corazon de Jesus did, then the full might of the state is brought to bear upon the residents. On January 11, hundreds of police arrived armed with armalites. Snipers were posted on the rooftops. The police fired volleys of live ammunition over the heads of the residents, including the elderly and children. They then fired tear gas, dismantled the neighborhood barricades and beat the residents with bamboo canes, arresting boys as young as eleven.

The residents resisted. Molotov cocktails and rocks were thrown at the incoming police. The police detained anyone with a sign of bruising or bleeding. A reporter was arrested.

The demolition crew followed. Sledgehammers broke through concrete walls of homes, leaving gaping holes of rubble and twisted reinforcement steel. Family furniture, appliances, personal belongings, shoes, clothing, letters and photos were thrown into heaping piles of debris—the flotsam and jetsam of decimated lives.

Three hundred families slept in the rubble-strewn street that night. Their homes destroyed, they picked through the garbage. Many had to be at work the next morning.



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