

Hunger in the Philippines reaches all-time highs

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Hunger has risen to historic highs in the Philippines, according to the latest findings from the country's pollster Social Weather Stations. The finding is an indictment of the capitalist system and the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic in which millions have lost their livelihood and employment without compensation.

Social Weather Survey released its findings last Wednesday based on its first survey conducted through face-to-face interviews since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Between November 21–25, the pollster sampled 1,500 adults and probed the issue of involuntary hunger—that is, hunger due to the lack of food to eat. The results were extrapolated to the general population with the assistance of the government's Philippine Statistics Authority population projections for 2020.

The questions asked were, “In the last three months, did it happen even once that your family experienced hunger and not have anything to eat?” If the answer was yes, respondents were asked: “Did it happen only once, a few times, often or always?” The answers “often” and “always” were taken as constituting severe hunger, the two other answers as moderate hunger.

The findings show that 16.0 percent of the population, or an estimated 4.0 million families, experienced involuntary hunger at least once in the past three months. This is actually a drop from the record high in September which reached 30.7 percent (almost a third of all families) owing to prolonged periods of unemployment and loss of income as a result of government lockdowns. However, it is still double the pre-pandemic levels of 8.8 percent which were recorded in December 2019.

Combining the quarterly hunger surveys in May (16.7 percent) and July (20.9 percent) with those in

September and December, the average hunger rate for Filipino families in 2020 assumes an historic high of 21.1 percent. This surpasses the previous records of 19.9 percent in 2011 and 2012.

Hunger was most prevalent in Metro Manila with 23.3 percent (almost 1 in 4 families), followed by 16.0 percent in Mindanao, 14.4 percent in Balance Luzon, and 14.3 percent in the Visayas.

The record high hunger rates of September are being used by the government of Rodrigo Duterte to force the population to go back to work, accept the risk of getting infected and produce profits. Virus restrictions have been eased in recent months in order to revive the economy which is reportedly set to contract by 9.5 percent this year.

“I’ve never seen hunger at this level before,” said Jomar Fleras, executive director of Rise Against Hunger (RAH) in an interview with Agence France-Presse (AFP).

“If you go out there everybody will tell you that they’re more afraid of dying from hunger than dying from COVID. They don’t care about COVID anymore.”

The latest figures show 459,789 total coronavirus cases, with 8,947 deaths. There are currently at least 28,000 active cases, down from a high of 83,000 in August, but this is set to rise in the months ahead as businesses reopen.

Charities are also under immense strain to meet the demand.

Flavie Villanueva, Food Programme Manager of ‘Society of the Divine Word’, began giving out free meals, 5 days a week in April. What began with 250 people lining up for meals each day has ballooned to 1,100.

“I believe that hunger has affected us severely to the

point that even those with homes, but [who] are living already in that desperate mode would come and ask food from us,” Villanueva said. “Hopefully we can continue to provide until Christmas or January.”

Hunger was already at the highest levels in Southeast Asia prior to the pandemic, according to a report from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization. It stated that between 2017 and 2019 about 59 million people were “moderately or severely food insecure.”

In addition, hunger has been exacerbated by an intense season of typhoons that have destroyed tens of thousands of homes.

The latest unemployment data from the government shows 8.7 percent out of work in October (almost double from a year ago) down from 10 percent in July. The underemployment rate—which depicts those willing but unable to find additional work—reached 14.4 percent in October, lower than July's 17.3 percent.

Daniel Auminto, who became unemployed due to government lockdowns, told AFP that it was “painful” to have lost everything and be on the street where he says the police treat them “like animals.”

“They should understand our situation, not treat us like pigs,” he said. “We’re already living like pigs.”

From the outset, the Duterte administration has neglected the social crisis and reacted with hostility to the growing unrest in the working class. Its repressive “war on drugs” in which around 30,000 people have been murdered in cold blood by police and vigilantes since 2016 is an attempt to terrorize the working class.

When a protest in Quezon City erupted in April over the lack of sufficient government food aid, protesters were arrested and President Duterte publicly encouraged the police to “shoot them dead.” The government has criminalized journalists, shut down the TV network ABS-CBN and signed a new Anti-Terror Act granting sweeping police-state powers.

The social devastation in the Philippines is a sharp expression of international processes. All over the world, the cost and horrors of the pandemic have been borne overwhelmingly by the working class and the poor.

According to a report from the World Bank in October, an additional 88 million to 115 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty (less than \$1.90 a day) this year, with the figure rising to 150 million by 2021, depending on economic conditions.

So-called middle income countries such as the Philippines, the report stated, account for 82 percent of the total, widening the international inequality between nations. The latest Social Weather Stations’ data on hunger makes clear that the social gulf within countries like the Philippines is also rapidly widening.



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