

Philippines: A year since lockdown, the poor struggles against homelessness

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Instead of addressing homelessness, the Philippine government has recently lifted its earlier memorandum, ordering the postponement of demolition and eviction of poor communities.

MANILA - Girly Caduco of Ususan Village in Taguig City has lived with demolition threats for more than five years now.

She thought that the “stay at home” orders brought about by the raging pandemic would give her relief from the constant threat of losing her home.

She was wrong.

The residents of Ususan Village, an urban poor community, are in the verge of becoming homeless even in this time of the pandemic when the world is threatened by a health crisis that has claimed millions of lives.

Their situation is not isolated as urban poor groups reveal that in the Philippines, eviction threats continue to be a reality for many of its poor. Communities in Tondo and Intramuros in Manila, San Roque and UP Campus in Quezon City, Navotas, Valenzuela, Bacoar in Cavite, and Bulacan have been constantly receiving demolition notices despite the Department of Interior and Local Government’s April 2, 2020 order to postpone evictions as the country remains under a state of calamity.

On January 22, Caduco received a 30-day “self-eviction” notice, followed by a 15-day notice, and then a seven-day notice which is to end today, March 16.

Caduco is at a loss why the government would want to rush their eviction in a time like this, with about 4,000 new daily cases of COVID-19, and a year since the Philippine government imposed mobility restrictions in order to supposedly curb the spread of the virus.

Instead of addressing homelessness during the pandemic, the Department of Interior and Local Government lifted on March 11 its earlier instruction, postponing demolitions and evictions in communities.

Mimi Doringo, secretary general of urban poor group Kadamay, described the reinstatement of planned demolitions and evictions as a “cruel move.” This despite having documented threats of demolition in many urban poor communities when the order postponing demolitions was still in place. The national government, she said in a previous statement, cannot wash its hands from demolition threats because the issuance of eviction notices is facilitated by state agencies.

“We are told to stay home, but demolitions are happening left and right,” Doringo said in a

statement.

Demolition, harassment

Caduco revealed that residents have been offered relocation areas, while others were told to demolish their homes until it is no longer livable. If they do so, households will reportedly receive monetary compensation ranging from \$600 to \$2,000.

Residents, however, have been adamant, especially those who are employed as construction workers, restaurant crew, or as call center agents in nearby high-end residential and business centers in Taguig, like The Fort and McKinley Hills.

On November 1 last year, while the pandemic continues to sow fear, a fire razed a portion of their community, destroying the houses of at least 25 families. After the incident, the guards prevented the residents from rebuilding which resulted in a clash. Three women residents were detained for unjust vexation and for assaulting a person in authority.

Bulatlat has also reported various demolition threats in Metro Manila during the pandemic.

About 5,000 residents of Katuparan Housing Project in Vitas, Tondo fear of losing their homes as the National Housing Authority is set to build another housing project in the area. Community leaders of Market 3 in Navotas, on the other hand, were summoned by the Philippine Navy to “surrender their fight for their housing,” according to Kadamay.

The government, Doringo said, cannot afford to wait for the pandemic to be over as they push for these so-called development projects.

Even poor residents of rural areas are not spared from demolition threats.

In Pinagpala, a farming and fishing community in Pasacao, Camarines Sur, residents have been struggling to remain in their homes as demolition threats, which began in 2016, continue during this time of the pandemic and even after the area was devastated by a series of typhoons in the latter part of 2020. The area is planned to be turned into an eco-tourism site.

Mia, not her real name, told *Bulatlat* in a phone interview that instead of addressing their pleas, they have been met with the deployment of private armies to harass those resisting demolition.

“Nowadays, problems and difficulties seem to be come from all directions. We worry how to put food on the table, face threats and harassments, protect ourselves from the raging pandemic, and defend our homes from demolition,” Mia said, adding that families who lost their homes from the typhoons were told by the local government that they are no longer allowed to rebuild their homes.

Nearly 60 families completely lost their houses and about a hundred were partially damaged. The local government offered financial assistance of \$420 on the condition that they transfer to the designated relocation site where they are to build their houses, said Mia.

Losing homes, livelihoods to disasters

Thousands of Filipinos have lost their homes, or were partially destroyed due to environmental calamities that devastated various communities. With hardly any help from concerned governments agencies, rising above the rubbles amid a raging pandemic is a nightmare.

Nearly half a million residents in the provinces of Cavite, Batangas, Laguna, Quezon were affected

by the January 12 Taal Volcano eruption. Around 800 homes were destroyed, while about 3,100 were partially damaged. Many livelihoods suffered with around \$12-million worth of damages to the agriculture sector, affecting commodities such as rice, coffee, banana and other high-valued crops.

This was just the start of the year. In the latter part of 2020, the country was hit by typhoons Quinta, Rolly and Ulysses, with the latter two affecting 2.3 million residents in eight regions, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The Department of Agriculture estimated at least P10-billion worth of damages to the agriculture sector as a result of the havoc wreaked by the three typhoons - affecting 150,000 farmers with damages covering about 150,000 hectares of agricultural land.

Government response in areas greatly affected, however, has been scarce, exacerbating the already desperate living conditions of many poor Filipinos.

The Bicol region, alone, though named as the region with the “fastest” development because supposed improvements on its agriculture services, economic opportunities, and provision of social service per government data, has more than a quarter of its population living below the government’s poverty line, as per 2018 data.

Social protection

From eviction threats to losing homes and livelihoods to disasters, the Filipino poor, desperately affected by the pandemic, did not receive adequate response from the government.

From January to August, the Philippine government’s debt has increased by \$39.5 billion or a total outstanding debt of \$199.8 billion, with the COVID response as an excuse, according to [independent think tank Ibon Foundation](#). But these debts did not translate into social protection for the most affected, as government spending has been focused on infrastructure, which remains as a top priority.

Ibon Foundation said the public spending for COVID response in 2021 is only equivalent to four percent of the projected total borrowing, or \$2.74 billion out of the \$62.4 billion intended for COVID-19 response. This does not include the budget allocation for PhilHealth, the state health insurance system, which will receive exactly the same amount as it did before the pandemic hit the country.

Meanwhile, public spending for infrastructure is pegged at \$22.9 billion.

Apart from the lack of social protection, urban poor communities also face eviction threats due to the construction of these government infrastructure projects. Kadamay’s Doringo said the urban poor does not have a say on this, with only the powers that be deciding on who gets to stay despite laws pushing for on-site development for the poor.

The Philippine National Railways extension programs, for example, threaten to evict more than 25,000 families as per [news reports](#).

The government’s amelioration program, too, has been inadequate and slow, with some cities covering only about 30 to 50 percent of their residents. This has resulted in chaotic distribution of aid, compromising the health of the recipients as they are pitted against each other, violating minimum health standards like physical distancing.

Ironically, the budget hearing before the Philippine Senate revealed that the government still has

“savings” from its amelioration program amounting to \$208.1 million. Senator Nancy Binay said she found it difficult to understand how the government agency managed to have [unreleased funds](#) that are scheduled to be returned to the national treasury when there are Filipinos, particularly jeepney drivers, who have long been waiting for much needed assistance.

Fighting back

Instead of listening to their cries, the urban poor’s legitimate concerns fell on deaf ears. Worse, they have been subjected to red-tagging, their offices raided, and community leaders arrested, to name a few.

Last month, Kadamay sought assistance with the Office of the Ombudsman regarding the red-tagging spree against their community leaders and members. How red-tagging translates to physical harm have become more emboldened this year.

In Pandi, Bulacan, the police searched the Kadamay office even without a court-issued warrant, [seizing copies](#) of alternative newspaper, Pinoy Weekly. The police said the paper is illegal for “teaching the people to fight the government.” But the worst attack this year on the urban poor’s struggle is the killing of its long-time leader Carlito Badion. Two days before he was [found dead](#) in Ormoc City, Badion was subjected to red-tagging and received death threats.

Amid inadequate social protection, [Pandi’s poor](#) is also fighting for better living conditions as they cultivate nearby idle lands to put food on their tables. Urban poor leaders, too, have led various relief drives in their humble attempt to ease the sufferings of the community, including the community kitchen of Sitio San Roque and the typhoon relief drives.

Caduco said that the inavailability of vaccines for the poor and harsher mobility restrictions with the new surge of COVID-19 cases are issues that mainly exacerbate their long-running problems of poverty and homelessness.

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