

# Right to land: still at the heart of peasant protest

A part from the currency crisis and the El Niño-induced drought, farmers had to contend with age-old land problems in the year just past. In fact many of the peasant campaigns launched in 1997 focused primarily on land disputes.

This time, peasants were struggling against Malacañang's practice of reversing DAR's distribution of their Certificate of Land Ownership Awards (CLOA) to give way to land conversion applications. Farmers from Bukidnon went as far as staging a hunger strike in front of the main DAR office in Manila to protest Executive Secretary Ruben Torres' practice of reversing DAR's decision in favor of the landowners. They were later joined in their protest by farmers' groups from the provinces of Bataan, Rizal, Cavite, Mindoro and Bulacan.

In the case of the 137 farmers-beneficiaries from Sumilao, Bukidnon, their mother-CLOA was issued as early as 13 October 1995. Still Exec. Sec. Ruben Torres reversed DAR's decision on 29 March 1997 on the grounds that the farmland was reclassified by the local government as an agro-industrial and educational center. Due to wide public sympathy for the farmers on hunger strike, President Ramos made a compromise decision. The President awarded 100 hectares of the contested land to the farmers, while the rest went back to the landowners. The Sumilao farmers' struggle, however, is far from over. As of January this year, the farmers have yet to occupy the land.

The other reversal cases met a gloomier fate. Although promised action within a month after the Sumilao case had been resolved, protesting farmers from the five provinces in Luzon all waited in vain for a resolution to their disputes. To this day, no action has been taken on their complaints.

Apart from the problems posed by Malacañang, peasants also had to contend with the slow progress of CARP implementation. Although DAR records show an impressive land distribution of 210,128 hectares for 1997, farm-



ers groups dismissed this pronouncement as mostly "paper victories." Many of the lands reported to have been distributed have not yet been occupied and tilled by the beneficiaries.

In a recent meeting with farmer leaders, DAR Undersecretary Jerry Bulatao admits that the figure stated in their accomplishment report may merely represent the number of CLOAs registered or handed out to farmers, without the benefit of actually having control over the land. Nonetheless, DAR's 1997-distribution rate represents a 30 percent drop from the 300,195 hectares of registered CLOA in 1996. Based on the DAR figures, 73,251 farmers benefited from agrarian reform nationwide as of 1997.

At a reported rate of 26.5 percent per year, conversion of farmlands into non-agricultural uses is also eating into the scope available for CARP distribution. As of 1997, DAR approved the conversion of 4,724 hectares of agricultural land in Central Luzon alone. In Bulacan, which is a basin for Metro Manila's spill-offs, 1,375 hectares of farmland have been approved for conversion.

Apart from conversions with DAR permits, there are also arbitrary bulldozings which constitute illegal conversions. DAR says most cases of illegal conversion in the region are also found in Bulacan. Reports say that from March to April 1997, 1,123 hectares of farmland have been converted illegally in Central Luzon. Most of the cases involved big real estate firms and housing developers. At this point, DAR has yet to provide the public with 1997 nationwide statistics on agricultural lands converted into other uses. Reports from farmers, however, say that land conversion cases are escalating.

Even legal remedies are proving to be too weak to deter land conversion. Personal interests among lawmakers (two-thirds of Congress are landowners) hindered the passage of a genuine land use code which would supposedly assure a sufficient amount of land for the different sectors including agriculture.

A bill (Senate Bill No. 1565) had already been filed in the 10th Congress, which sought to create a National Land Use Code (NLUC) by com-


bining land use-related bills in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. NLUC proposes to delineate lands for specific purposes, thereby, easing conflicts among various sectors for limited lands. Peasant groups, however, fear that the bill will not adequately represent farmers' sentiments. Several provisions are lax in protecting agricultural and agrarian reform areas from further encroachment, and restrict the participation of farmers in overseeing the law's implementation.

The controversial nature of the Land Use Code bill dampened any attempt to enact it in 1997. Instead, legislators pushed for the passage of the Agricultural Modernization Act, now law by virtue of Republic Act 8435.

At first glance, the Agricultural Modernization Law seems to offer a genuine solution against the increasing cases of land conversion. The law proposes a five-year ban on the conversion of prime farmlands into industrial and residential estates with particular emphasis on irrigated lands and those with potential for high-value crops. But the extremely limited scope of irrigated

lands exposes the essential flaw in the law. With 90 percent of farmlands rainfed, the bill offers very limited protection against conversion.

Farmers are also skeptical of the promises of the law to infuse millions of pesos for building up the country's agriculture. For one, farmers are wary that in the identification of the Strategic Agricultural Fisheries and Development Zones (SAFDZs)—where most of the PHP20 million that the law mandated for agricultural modernization will go—the sentiments of peasants will not be represented.

The previous year saw little progress and too many compromises in the farmers' search for agrarian justice. Indeed, 1997 was another lackluster year in the peasantry's long-drawn-out struggle for land they could claim as their own. It is indeed ironic that, as the Philippines celebrates the centennial of Philippine independence this 1998, the country's farmers continue to suffer from the same landlessness and rural injustice that led them to revolution over a hundred years ago. 

## 1998: A doomed year?



Covering-up the true state of the economy is one task government found impossible to do. The massive slowdown in the production of key sectors is a predicament hardly contained by government's optimism. Government may have succeeded in distorting inflationary levels and GDP growth, but the rising cost of living put a check on the orchestrated reality.

For agriculture, the currency problem as well as the El Niño are but added problems to their already beleaguered production. Worse, government failed to heed the signals of the changing times. The currency fluctuation soared the cost of importation. Yet government is still adhering to the same import-dependent strategy. The Agricultural Modernization Law is supposed to address the present problems of agriculture and catapult production to the needs of the future, yet it merely enforces importation as a strategy in securing food and further limits the scope of government intervention to the countryside.