
Philippines: Planting trees and terror

At the beginning of the 1950s, the Philippines still had some 100,000 sq. kms of primary forests, which had shrunk to some 10,000 sq. kms by 1988. The main beneficiaries of such destruction were the logging companies and wood consumers abroad. While its main promoter was the government itself who opened up the forest to "development".

Now the government is again intervening negatively in the forest sector, but now under the guise of "planting forests". It has come up with an "industrial tree development" plan for the next three years which implies the allotment of 500,000 hectares of "open and forest lands" to private foreign and local companies, allegedly to stop the country's dependence on imported timber. The regions to be covered by the Integrated Forest Management Agreements (IFMA) for these investments are Cagayan Valley, the Cordilleras, Northern Mindanao and Caraga --all with considerable tribal populations. Five firms which have signed up in Caraga alone would invest US\$ 100 million to "develop" some 111,000 hectares in Agusan del Sur, where 13 IFMA companies are already operating.

This kind of development projects follow a cycle of dispossession and violence, with terrible costs for local people. The pattern is always the same: the soldiers come in first, sow terror in order to displace the locals or discourage opposition, then the project gets implemented.

That was the case for Lumad villagers in Agusan del Sur. Lumad is a Bisayan term meaning "native" or "indigenous". It is adopted by a group of 15 from a more than 18 Mindanao ethnic groups to distinguish them from the other Mindanaons, Moro or Christian. At present, Mindanao Lumads account for 2.1 million out of the total 6.5 million indigenous people nationally. The Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center (LRC) denounced that an entire Banwaon village was forced out of their lands and homes just as the government was proudly announcing the projects. On July 22, the soldiers searched every house in Tabon-tabon, barangay Mahagsay, to look for one NPA guerrilla, but found instead Juan Flores, a teacher at the Religious of the Good Shepherd mission-school in Kimambukagyang. Though Flores pleaded innocence, the military tortured and interrogated him for hours on end until, finding no evidence, they released him.

But Flores was not the only victim. On July 21, also in San Luis, soldiers tortured Lolong Badbaran and Eddie Badbaran, both Banwaon rattan cutters. They also detained Dino Rueda, a motorcycle driver; and 60-year-old Linda Loyola, who had witnessed the torture of the Badbarans. The four were tied to the posts of a hut and were not released until the next day. "The government knows that the Banwaon people will strongly oppose the loss of more tribal lands," said Otto Precioso, a Banwaon leader. "That is why they are now terrorising the communities."

What is happening in San Luis is not different from what has been happening to the Ata-Manobo tribe in Talaingod, Davao del Norte, where thousands of hectares of ancestral lands were taken over by the plywood firm C. Alcantara & Sons, converting these into tree plantations under an IFMA. When the Lumads decided to fight back --even declaring a pangayaw (war of vengeance) in 1994 after hundreds of Ata-Manobo were forced to evacuate to this city due to militarization-- the government

decided to beef up its troops in Talaingod, making the soldiers the veritable security guards of the company. The terror in Talaingod continues to this day.

Joel Virador, the secretary-general of Karapatan in Southern Mindanao, said last week that the new IFMA plantations would give rise to the same abuses experienced in Talaingod and elsewhere. “We are certain of that because it has been our sad history that every time certain economic interests are implemented in Mindanao, they are preceded by heavy military deployment and, consequently, abuses”, he said. “The tortures of citizens are

part of the government’s policy to quash resistance to anti-people projects”, he added.