

**PHILIPPINES**

# UCAN SPECIAL REPORT: WHAT'S BEHIND THE NEGROS FAMINE CRISIS

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The worst of widespread hunger affecting an estimated one million people in Negros Occidental province may end when the milling season begins and most sugar workers return to work in October.

But observers here fear relief will be temporary, because the crop is lean and it is uncertain how many fields will be replanted for next year.

A few months' work might be followed by hunger -- with no foreseeable end.

In a pastoral letter draft in July, Philippine bishops said the famine "raised the spectre of a generation of brain-damaged children."

Political and economic problems causing the famine remain, and a showdown is expected soon between the communist-led New People's Army (NPA) and planters.

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Another possible source of turmoil, observers say, is the charge by some with long involvement with the sugar industry, that famine was deliberately created by planters to dramatize their need for government financing.

If the charge proves valid -- or is believed by sugarworkers -- the showdown between workers and planters may come early next year when work ends, they say.

Twenty years ago, large Negros sugar planters dominated Philippine society like oil-rich families elsewhere.

They had political power and virtually unlimited access to government loans to build economic empires and fuel rich lifestyles outside Negros.

The top five percent of planters kept half of Negros' income, as workers' wages declined in real value year-by-year.

On average, each worker's family lost at least one child in infancy.

Sugar planters were feudal lords of plantations. Sugarworkers identified themselves as "the man of Elizalde" or "Gustilo" or another planter.

"The Catholic Church was a tame court chaplain in those days says Columban Father Michael Martin, his society's superior in Negros.

Now the industry is bankrupt, political power belongs to President Ferdinand Marcos from the arid Ilocos region, and once-docile workers join the NPA.

The Church is seen by planters and workers as siding with workers, especially since Pope John Paul II visited in 1981 and affirmed their right to organize.

For many, the best signs of change here in the last 20 years are the decline of planters and the Negros Church's new role as supporter of the poor.

Marcos admits serious problems in the sugar industry.

In Presidential Decree 1971, issued last February to restructure the Philippine Sugar Commission (PHILSUCOM), which manages the industry, he said:

"Global and domestic conditions have brought the sugar industry into imminent collapse ... spawned a serious peace and order problem and caused economic dislocation."

"The industry may collapse and deteriorate," he warned, "to a level beyond economic recovery."

The sugar industry, half of it in Negros, accounted for 27 percent of the country's foreign earnings in 1974. By 1983 it was down to eight percent.

Two "global conditions," Marcos said, caused the slump.

The country lost its preferential trade relationship with the United States in 1974. Previously, the U.S. gave the Philippines a guaranteed market for all its sugar at prices usually above the world price.

In 1975, the European Economic Community began unloading subsidized sugar, causing its world price to fall from US 65 cents per pound in 1975 to US 3-4 cents today. Philippine sugar costs about US 11 cents per pound to produce.

Production is now for domestic use and a limited but well-priced share of the U.S. quota. These absorb only about 50-60 percent of the industry's capacity.

Planters say PHILSUCOM, headed by Marcos' friends, has not paid fair returns. Their complaint, backed by International Monetary Fund opposition to Philippine economic monopolies, caused Marcos to issue his restructuring decree.

Negros planters say it did nothing but "take real power from one Marcos crony (Roberto Benedicto) and give it to another (Armando Gustilo)".

Because they haven't been paid, they say, they are in trouble with banks.

Norman Campos, spokesman for Negros Economic Development Foundation, told UCA News, "This year's harvest may be the last, unless the government comes through with a new generous financial package. Planters want a fair price for sugar and a moratorium and restructuring of their debts. If they don't get it, no more sugar. Then we'll really see suffering here in Negros."

Jesuit Father Hector Mauri, who has worked for 30 years with sugar workers in Negros, claims sugar planters tolerated this year's hunger to dramatize their financial problems. "It's a form of blackmail," he told UCA News.

Officials of the National Federation of Sugar Workers, the most militant Negros union with a membership of 60,000, agree with Father Mauri.

"There's so much hatred of Marcos and Benedicto," a PHILSOCUM official said, "the planters can do anything. It's possible they let the people starve."

Father Mauri said sugar planters always gave a rice subsidy or "consumo" to workers during the "tiempo numerto" (off-season) when sugar is ripening and there is little work. They deducted the cost from salaries when there was work.

"This year, the planters said they were unable to give any consumo. That's a lie. They let their workers starve to make their political point," he said.

Negros was the only sugar-producing area in the country to experience hunger.

"If planters really didn't have money, why weren't the other areas similarly affected?" Father Mauri asked. Since no Negros planter gave the consumo, their unanimity indicates "some type of consensus."

"Why are they able to hire thousands of new members for their paramilitary units if they don't have money?"

Father Mauri refers to reports that planters are hiring up to 5,000 members for Civilian Home Defense Forces (CHDF) to combat the NPA. Recruits are trained by the Philippine army but financed by planters, reports say. The CHDF is a nationwide paramilitary network of the government.

Father Ireneo Gordoncillo, Negros diocese social action director, is only slightly less severe in assessing planter's responsibility for the hunger.

"No planter took anything away from his own life style to feed his workers," he said. "Planters didn't get paid by the government for the last crop, but they could have fed the workers if they wanted."

"I don't think they deliberately wanted workers to starve, but they wouldn't do anything special to help. Big planters didn't give rice, but gave work on a rotation basis. That wasn't enough. There was hunger on every plantation."

The planters have reason to fear the NPA, which fastened on the hunger issue.

"The NPA has doubled in strength the last year, principally because of the poverty and hunger here," Bishop Antonio Fortich of Bacolod said.

About 80 people have died in the NPA-government war so far this year, most of them innocent workers or farmers, says Father Gordoncillo. The NPA was strong in southern Negros, but it is now able to move in the north, he said.

"They took 500 guns from Benedicto's maritime school near Bacolod earlier this year, and later took over the Rangers' headquarters in Isabela. And there's no question the NPA has the support of the people," Father Gordoncillo said.

Severe third-degree malnutrition among Negros children reached 7-8 percent, according to a UNICEF survey in July. This doubled the 1984 rate.

UNICEF officials told UCA News some countries declare 3 percent an emergency.

Doctor Violeta Gonzaga of La Salle College in Bacolod City says the third-degree malnutrition rate was 10 percent or more in August.

Bishop Fortich, 72, played a key role in Negros hunger relief work. Much of the money and food raised privately throughout the country were sent to him. He received half the money raised by a drive conducted by Business Day newspaper. In August, the government gave him remaining rice it had set aside for relief.

"Four or five years ago the workers were like sheep," Father Gordoncillo said. "Whatever their planter said, they followed. That's no more. The hard times here have been the great change agent.

"The NFSW has helped, and the NPA, and to some degree our Basic Christian Communities (BCCs), but it is the poverty and hunger that have opened people's eyes. Sugar workers have stood up. Not all of them, but things are different."

He says the Church's main work is formation of BCCs. About 70 percent of priests, he says, favor people's organizations, such as unions, though only 50 percent actively support such groups.

"You won't get any priest supporting the planters," he said.

There are about 150,000 sugar workers in Negros Occidental, or one worker family averaging two workers for every three hectares of sugarland. Most live on the plantations.

Their wages have decreased in real value over the last 50 years.

Before World War II, they earned 60 centavos per day, but were able to buy 10 kilos of rice. In the late 1960s, they earned 4 pesos per day, which could buy about seven kilos of rice.

Today's highest paid field worker gets 28 pesos, enough to buy four kilos of rice. NFSW officials say 90 percent of the workers now get 12-15 pesos per day.

About 10,000 Negros sugar planters share about 200,000 hectares of sugarland. But "sugar planters" means 300 families owning 48 percent of the land.

While they had the loans and US market until 1974, they were careless about improving farm efficiency. Only 10 percent of sugarland is irrigated.

"Now that the US market and the easy government loans are gone, the chickens have come home to roost," a Bacolod newsman said.

He said new sugar industry leaders will now run a tight ship. "The sugar industry must be trimmed by one-third," he said. "The domestic market and the limited U.S. market still available will be kept for Marcos' loyal supporters.

"As quickly as possible the larger farms will be mechanized to make them more efficient and to cut the number of workers down to levels that can be easily controlled," he said -- increasing unemployment and hunger.

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