

SLUM FIRES IN MANILA – EVOLVING CONFLICT BETWEEN URBAN POOR AND PRIVATE PROPERTY OWNERS

by Nina Johnen

On April 11, 2011 a disastrous fire in an informal slum settlement in Quezon City, Manila, broke out. Injuring 15 people, leaving 10.000 homeless and causing open violence between slum inhabitants and city officials, this fire has been only one out of numerous, but in the extent of human tragedy the most dramatic in recent years. This article gives an outline of the political conflict that has been evolving around these mostly illegal slum settlements, and attempts to show how the basic lack of housing in the Philippine capital can become a source of human rights violations.

After the official definition of UN-HABITAT, the United Nations Human Settlements Program, a slum is a neighborhood whose households lack access to clean water and sanitation, security of tenure, durability of housing and sufficient living area (UN HABITAT 2006/7). In a report from 2010, the Philippine Institute for Development Studies said that 37% of the 12 million inhabitants of Manila live in slums (Ballesteros 2010).

The reality is that most of those settlements affected by fires are illegal. The official term for the practices of people illegally inhabiting those areas is "squatting", hence the government refers to these people as "squatters". In Manila one out of four families are squatters, which adds up to an amount of 560.000 families (Inquirer 2008). Another reality is that the slum areas, although not officially utilized, belong to somebody. These may be private landowners, real estate agencies or even the state itself. Those actors have a big interest in revitalizing those areas economically and so they apply any method within their means to expel squatters from their land. At the same time those areas are home to thousands of people who have the right to residence within their country's borders, but as poor people at the same time belong to the most vulnerable parts of society. Usually the Philippine national housing authority asks the inhabitants of those illegal settlements to leave within a specific period of time because the land is going to be used for new construction projects. Although Philippine Lina Law (Inquirer 2008) requires a consultation between property owners and illegal occupants, with a 30-day notice of eviction and the duty for land developers to offer appropriate housing alternatives for people who have to leave the area concerned, the alternatives offered by government programs do very often not meet the needs of the

people. New housing settlements are built at the city's outskirts so that people have trouble finding a job because they are too far out and cannot afford to pay for the transfer to the city center. The only government initiated program targeting the problem of those displaced people is called Balik Pobinsya (Inquirer 2011a). It requires them to leave the city but only pays for their transfer back to the provinces they came from.

On top of that, the proceeding of ejecting people from their houses very often lack the required conflict management expertise from the state officials' side. Police and the cities demolition squads themselves get actively involved in the evolving conflict and use open violence to keep people from the areas (Reuters 2010). After fire has driven the inhabitants away, the property owners usually appear claiming their territory and ask the former inhabitants to leave the area as quickly as possible. Remains of the settlements are swiftly removed by the city's clearing teams, so that the owners can sell their property or start using it for their own benefit. At the same time, former slum inhabitants are prohibited by the police from entering the area in order to deter them from rebuilding their houses. Through those practices described, a number of human rights, such as the right to life, liberty and security of person (Art. 3), the right to freedom of movement and residence (Art.13) or the right on a decent standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of oneself and one's family (Art. 25), are violated on a regular basis.

Conflicts between slum inhabitants and landowners are therefore not a new phenomenon. Violent excesses between former slum inhabitants and city clearing teams have occurred on a regular basis during the last years (Reuters 2010), leaving

many people injured. What's new is the illegal strategy of landowners to arson the area they claim. The amount of slum fires in Manila in recent years has created suspicion among the population concerned, the social and NGO sector. The question to be asked is whether those fires are true accidents or set strategically by landowners and land developers to gain quick access to land formerly illegally inhabited by the slum population.

In the earlier mentioned slum, the fire on April 11 was the fifth within a period of a few months. Those fires are officially caused by faulty electric cookers, open fires or illegal power lines set up by the slums inhabitants. However experts like urban sociologist Erhard Berner from the International Institute of Social Studies (Davis 2006) or Carl Marx Carumba from the NGO IDEALS¹ express their concern by exposing another truth. Private landowners and real estate agencies seem to have found their very own

strategy of taking possession of their lands. Rather than to file cases against illegal settlements in front of a court or to endure the wait for official demolition orders, they choose another, even more effective way. They arson, following the logic that after the demolition of the squatted areas it is usually easier to remove the people. To arson, they hire people who chase cats or rats with a kerosene-burning-cloth on their tails through the slums. Those animals unwillingly have plenty of opportunities to set fire, while they panically run all over the slum, hitting anything from people to trash to houses with their burning tail.

Of course the above-mentioned strategies are not the causes of all fires that had erupted in Manila's slums within the last years, but those incidences described above have been repeatedly reported by urban poor. In February 2011 only, 30.000 people lost their homes in slum fires all over Manila (Inquirer 2011b).

In its impact on human rights violations affecting thousands of people, those illegal practices reach dimensions that are usually only met in cases of war crimes.

The new government faces big challenges. There is a lack of new housing stalks in Manila, there is a need for emergency programs that offer temporary evacuation homes and lifesaving infrastructure such as access to clean water or medical help in case of fires, there is a need to put the landowners who can be held responsible for arson on trial, and foremost there is a need to provide efficient and sustainable anti-poverty programs that target big cities as well as the countryside, All actions described would prevent probable causes of human rights violations to a great extent. So far, the urban poor are being punished twice: first by the landowners, dispelling them from their homes, and second by the government that allows this extreme urban poverty to persist. ■

1) The Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services (IDEALS), see for more information: <http://ideals.org.ph>.

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IPON STARTS ITS PRESENCE IN NORTHERN MINDANAO

Having conducted a pre-study in Northern Mindanao, IPON is glad to open its office in the Philippines south. The farmer's organisation "Don Carlos Bukidnon United Farmers Association Inc." (DCBUFAI) requested IPON in May 2011 to observe the human rights situation. Human rights defenders associated with DCBUFAI are struggling to achieve a fair distribution of land ownership granted through the "Certificate of Land Ownership Award" for land they have tilled for more than two decades and which is now awarded legally through the state-led agrarian reform act. Meanwhile Southern Fruits Products Inc. intends to expand their pineapple fields in the area of Don Carlos. The land conflict is therefore less defined as a struggle between landowner and farmers but as a toilsome struggle between farmers and a multinational business group that is politically influential. In order to create an atmosphere of eye-level cooperation as a pre-condition for the work of the human rights defenders of DCBUFAI, IPON is dedicated to establish its presence in Bukidnon and thereby facilitate and enable human rights observations to take place and hopefully contribute to achieving sustainable peace.

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