

## NON-VIOLENT TOOLS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ON NEGROS



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*TFM (Task Force Mapalad) uses non-violent protest methods to demonstrate their anger about the vague implementation of CARP and to demand the fulfilment of the promises of the agrarian reform.*

With the use of non-violent forms of protests, the peasant organisation TFM wants to draw attention to the situation of the poor farmers, who are mostly affected by the passive attitude of the government towards the Philippine agrarian reform. Their phrase "Fire from below" symbolizes the active efforts of the landless farmers and farm workers in the form of protest camp, marches, community organizing, dialogues or even hunger strikes. These are in response to the poor implementation within the Philippine agrarian reform. Last year for example the farmers of Negros and Mindanao marched to Manila and due to desperation they shaved their heads and started a hunger strike in front of the DAR National (Department of Agrarian Reform). TFM organizes campaigns and mobilizes the community while being committed to non-

violence. But why is TFM endorsing non-violent forms of protests? Danilo Gaban, TFM-Coordinator for Negros, explains to us that the struggle of the farmers is comparable to the struggle Jesus had to deal with while on earth. He also suffered quietly, with the will to use peaceful forms of defence. This is the motivation behind the use by the farmers of non-violent protest forms after all these years. Their belief and the support of the church give them strength with Jesus as role model on their side. Furthermore, Gaban says, nobody can be convinced honestly while using violence. There will be no recourse, neither within the society nor within the members of the Philippine government. So everybody who wants to be a part of TFM should operate within this legal approach. So although their struggle for land has already endured for more than 20



© IPON | Bishop Navarra blesses the TFM farmers after a mass in the San Sebastian Cathedral church in Bacolod.

years, the farmers still do believe in their non-violent methods.

The recent three-day protest march, which took place on 6th February underlined this commitment to the use of non-violence protest form. Using the motto "The Last Two Minutes" a few hundred farmers started their protest march from two different cities in Negros Occidental. José Rodito Angeles, former TFM-Speaker and farmleader of Hacienda Grande, emphasized the urgency of this walk by saying, that the implementation of CARP (Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program) should be done within the year 2012. In 2013, local elections will be held in Negros, which means, that applications for land titles will be delayed again. Because of the political reorganization and by the interest to cooperate with the rich elite of Negros, the farmers can not expect the support of the new elected politicians. By 2014 the agrarian reform will end. Besides that, it is not really in the interests of the Philippine government to implement the agrarian reform on time.

"Our protest march", so Angeles, "is not just for our land and our families. We march for all of the farmers disfranchised by the government when they lost interest in pursuing agrarian reform and chose to turn away from the pleading farmers. We call on other farmers to join us in putting a stop to the deafening silence of P-Noy (President) and the disheartening lack of accomplishment of DAR. If we would not act now, we might be too late." Meaning that the farmers who are not able to get a land title by this year, will never get their own land. "We will no longer wait for the president to act; we will move him to action. We have waited all our lives," said TFM-Negros Präsident Alberto Jayme.

The Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) failed to reach its own aims for the years 2010 and 2011. Last year less than 50 percent of the area in Negros was



© IPON | IPON observer Gerlinde Becker conducting an interview.

distributed to the farmers. The whole development in the agrarian sector is a sad story. On Negros Island, only five percent of the supposedly distributed area was distributed to farmers since the beginning of the agrarian reform at the end of the 1980s; namely only 1,151 hectares out of 23,323 hectares. This hopelessness and the resulting anger disposed the farmers to join the protest march.

The protest march was supported by the Catholic Church by blessing and praying

for the farmers as well as by providing accommodations for the nights.

In the morning of February 6, two groups of farmers started their walk. Meeting point of the first group was San Carlos, while the second group started their walk in La Castellana. Self-made banners were hang on buses, that followed the protest march and served as resting point during the three day march. Farmers positioned themselves and upheld banners with slogans saying " Too fast on corruption,



© IPON | TFM farmers on their way to Bacolod during their protest march.

too slow on poverty alleviation,” or “Pres. P-Noy and Secretary de los Reyes: Nasaan ang suporta?” In the first three hours of the march it seemed that the speed of the march reflected the impatience and desperation of the farmers. Fast strides and an indescribable restlessness plunged the first hours of the march. One could almost sense an elation amongst the farmers hoping that this march would finally change their situation. As the blistering sun rose during noonday the speed slowed down. The farmers interrupted their march to eat their food or even for a quick nap. The whole walk stands metaphorically for their long struggle the farmers are going through, dominated alternately by hope, that the situation would finally improve and by disillusionment, when farmers have to admit, that the political power of the „landlords“ is too influential and that even the Philippine government does not show real dedication for the agrarian reform.

After the break, the farmer continued their march rested and satiated, but the energy that was felt before did not reach the former level. Maybe it was the sun that exhausted the farmers, but maybe it was also the long lasting fight for their rights as landless farmers that caused the exhaustion. Some older farmers took a rest in the bus, while the younger ones continued their walk, holding the banners.

At around 3 pm the farmers reached Victoria, where they planned to stay overnight. Reverently,

the farmers entered the church. No one missed touching the Jesus statue and to genuflect at least a few seconds before sitting down on the hard wooden benches of the church. Most of the farmers were silent and thoughtful, maybe some were just tired. The rest of the day the farmers prayed and rested.

In the morning at five the priest held a mass to bless and pray for the farmers who gratefully received the blessing and prayers. Encouraged and rested, the farmers continued their walk.

During the second day more and more farmers from the different haciendas in Negros joined the walk and at the end of the day around 300 farmers marched into the town of Silay. Also in Silay the church served as shelter and accommodation for the exhausted farmers. On February 8, all farmers converged in Bacolod to demonstrate in unity in front of the DAR and to award President Aquino and the responsible minister for the agrarian reform with the “Kalabasa Award”, an award for extreme lack of achievement. On February 9, a delegation of farmer continued their walk by boarding the ferry to Manila, after being blessed by the bishop of Bacolod, Navarra, who also submitted a letter to the farmers addressed to President Aquino. Bishop Navarra compared the situation of the farmers with the Jewish people who Moses led to the Promised Land of God. “Yes, God heard the cry of his poor sacadas and poor little farmers when the Agrarian

Reform was enacted. A taste of the Promised Land was at last possible for them," Navarra wrote in his letter. He continued by mentioning, that this hope was soon abolished when the farmers recognized the unattainability of this dream. Not only did the Bishop request the President to use his power to finally implement the CARP, he also requested Secretary de los Reyes and the big landowners to finally hear the cry of the farmers and give them their allowed land.

After this emotional Holy Mass, the farmers walked to the port of Bacolod, invigorated and full of hope, to continue their march towards Manila.

In Manila other farmers from Batangas and Mindanao converged in front of the DAR National to camp out and to demand the promises President Aquino gave during his election campaign. "We are appalled by our President's deafening silence on CARPER (extended agrarian reform). We feel like he has no heart for CARPER after all of his promises," Jayme said.

Manila's Bishop Pabillo, national

director of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines-National Secretariat for Social Action, Justice and Peace supports the protest of the farmers and held a public Mass for the farmers on February 11, in DAR Central Office in Elliptical Road, Quezon City. The support from the church motivates the farmers to keep on fighting non-violently for their rights. After two days of camping in front of the DAR National by the farmers, Secretary de los Reyes were forced to negotiate with them. These ended when the Secretary gave the wanted admission to the farmers. Sadly though, on Valentine's Day the Presidential Security Group and the police dispersed the peaceful farmers' gathering and 29 farmers were put in prison. Allegedly they acted against the law which first prohibits protests before Malacañang and secondly prohibits to be shirtless in public. Some farmers wrote their demands on their torsos so that the police had a reason to put them in prison. Indeed the farmers were allowed to leave prison after a few hours, but still: this action showed very

much how unwelcome the farmers were. Also, the violent answer to the non-violent protests of the farmers shows clearly the attitude of the President towards the farmers. This incident was condemned by Bishop Vincente Navarra and Bishop Broderick Pabillo, who both appealed to President Aquino to hear the cry of the poor farmers.

Farmers say, that under President Aquino the CARP had its worst year. TFM is already organizing the next nationwide protest campaign in case Secretary de los Reyes does not fulfil his promise. If this march does really happen, it will last three months with Davao as the city where it will be begin. Further cities and places that are involved are amongst others Cagayan de Oro, Cebu, Toledo City, San Carlos, Bacolod, Iloilo, Boracay, Mindoro, Batangas and Manila. Supposedly 1,000 farmers are expected to participate. But this will only take place if the government again fail to fulfil their concession. ■

#### SOURCES

- The found information on this article was given by Danilo Gaban.

## MANDATES AFFIRMED



*The mandate conferences in 2011 and 2012 ceremonially certified the ongoing cooperation between IPON and Task Force Mapalad (TFM) on Negros and the official partnership with the Panalsalan Dagumbaan Tribal Association (PADATA) on Mindanao.*

*IPON Mindanao has been working with the indigenous group PADATA since July 2011. On 29th January 2012, the deal for a future cooperation between the two organisations was sealed. The mandate conference took place in Panalsalan, Bukidnon on Mindanao. More or less 60 PADATA members attended the event. PADATA is henceforth the first official partner organisation of IPON on Mindanao.*

*The mandate with TFM was renewed for another year on Negros on 16th December 2011. More than 70 people attended the meeting. The former president of TFM, José Rodito Angeles, depicted IPON's successful work on Negros over the past few years and emphasised on the importance of extending the cooperation. There are still more than 135,000 hectares of land left to be relocated under the land reform.*