

As hunger rises, Philippine authorities take aim at farmers and rural activists

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‘Even lockdowns did not stop killings and militarisation in the countryside.’

Last year had already been unkind to Renato Gameng, a farm worker in the Philippines’ northern Isabela province. The coronavirus brought periodic lockdowns, leaving farmers stranded from their crops. A controversial rice import liberalisation law had decimated domestic rice production, leaving fewer jobs.

Then, late in 2020, the Philippines was hit by six straight storms culminating in November’s [Typhoon Vamco](#). The floods that followed washed out farm land in Gameng’s Cagayan Valley region, sweeping away houses and animals, and destroying corn and rice crops during the harvest season.

Today, food prices have skyrocketed in local markets, and temporary farm jobs are scarce. “Our normal lives are in poverty,” said Gameng. “This is not normal for us.”

Filipino farm workers like Gameng are struggling after a year of lockdowns and disasters decimated crops and income. And their pain has been passed on to consumers in the form of soaring food prices and rising hunger.

Food inflation rates reached [6.2 percent](#) in March, and more than [one in five](#) Filipinos didn’t have enough food to eat at some point in 2020 – a record high that is double pre-pandemic levels – according to household surveys by Social Weather Stations, a non-profit research institution.

Government relief – sporadic [cash payments](#) of about \$100, or food parcels – hasn’t come close to meeting people’s needs. Instead, [rights groups](#) say the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte has tried to silence its critics, including outspoken [rice farmers](#) like Gameng, citizens criticising the slow pace of food aid, and relief workers trying to fill the gaps.

Gameng chairs the local rural alliance DAGAMI. Like other progressive farmer leaders, he has been [labelled a terrorist](#) and [threatened](#) by local officials for speaking out against government policy.

“I’m just fighting for the welfare of farmers,” Gameng said. “It’s the government who caused the poor farmer’s burden.”

“More Filipinos are going to bed hungry.”

Gideon Lasco, a lecturer at the University of the Philippines, says the Duterte administration’s heavy hand against critics – often labelled as pasaway, or disobedient ones – mirrors its so-called [war on drugs](#), which has seen some [8,600 people killed](#) in police raids since 2016.

“I see parallels with the drug war,” said Lasco, who has researched health crises and the government’s drug crackdown. “The *pasaway* have taken the place of the addict as a scapegoat for

the pandemic.”

The Philippines recently re-instituted strict [movement restrictions](#) in Manila and other areas as COVID-19 cases surge, raising fears that hunger will continue to climb. The Philippines has averaged roughly 10,000 new daily cases since late March – at least double its first-wave peak in 2020.

The government says it is [fast-tracking](#) policies to stabilise food supply and tame inflation. Still, “more Filipinos are going to bed hungry,” Karl Kendrick Chua, the government’s chief economic planner, [warned](#) in February.

Hunger in the Philippines

Surveys by Social Weather Stations, a research firm, show the percentage of households who reported not having enough food to eat has doubled since before the COVID-19 pandemic.

‘Shoot them dead’

The Philippine economy contracted by 10 percent in 2020, according to the [World Bank](#), driven by a range of factors, including the pandemic, strict coronavirus containment measures, and the overlapping typhoons.

The impacts have reverberated up the food supply chain, from farmers and farm workers unable to make a living, to everyday households seeing food costs inflate beyond reach.

Government food and cash relief, dispersed in two relief bills, was slow to arrive as lockdowns and job losses erased weekly paychecks last year. Protesters, as well as volunteers trying to help, found themselves branded as troublemakers.

“Our efforts to respond to this crisis are hampered by harassment and repressive measures to stop our work,” said Cita Managuelod, executive director of the Center for Genuine Agrarian Reform, an advocacy group supporting agricultural workers in the Cagayan Valley.

In December, relief workers with her organisation were stopped at a police checkpoint and held at gunpoint during an attempt to deliver aid to farmers in Sitio Laguis, a community where the government has tried to [displace residents](#) for years, Managuelod said. Like many progressive organisations, Managuelod’s group has been “[red-tagged](#)”, or labelled without evidence by state officials as a front for the communist New People’s Army, which has fought a [decades-long insurgency](#) that has claimed thousands of lives.

Last April, 21 residents of San Roque, an informal settlement in Quezon City, northeast of Manila, were [arrested](#) after gathering on a major thoroughfare to demand government food aid. That evening, Duterte [responded](#) by ordering security forces confronting quarantine violators to “shoot them dead”.

Six volunteers with an activist group were also [charged](#) with violating quarantine restrictions while transporting relief supplies. Police accused them of distributing “propaganda materials”. Days later, 18 people, including relief volunteers, were [arrested](#) for quarantine violations.

In rural areas, land reform advocates have become targets of [deadly state operations](#) ostensibly targeting communist rebels. These have become [more frequent](#) since COVID-19 lockdowns began, rights groups say. In the sugar production hub of Negros in the central Philippines, the National Federation of Sugar Workers – a group with a [long history](#) of fighting for land rights – has been

targeted in multiple deadly operations. Antonio Arellano, one of the federation's chairmen, was [killed](#) by four unidentified assailants in February. He was previously accused of involvement with the New People's Army.

"Even lockdowns did not stop killings and militarisation in the countryside," said John Milton Lozande, secretary-general of NFSW. "The state forces seem to perceive all organisations as communist-influenced."

Sardines and rice

Even government policies meant to ease food shocks have ended up costing farmers, analysts say.

During last year's hard lockdowns, local governments distributed food packs of canned sardines and rice. But Managuelod said farmers weren't consulted about their needs. Many produce farmers, burdened by movement restrictions or labour shortages, were unable to tend to their crops and were forced to abandon them in the fields.

"[Local governments were] not connected at all with farmers, or even traders," said Rosario Guzman, head of the agriculture team at IBON Foundation, a Manila-based think tank.

The government's agriculture department initially responded to the pandemic with [a \\$600 million programme](#) aimed at increasing the country's "food adequacy" – a quarter of it devoted to loans and subsidies meant to boost rice production through the pandemic. But rice farmers say they cannot afford to take on more debt, and they continue to feel the pains of the 2019 Rice Tariffication Law, a controversial measure that liberalised imports and led to [sudden losses for domestic rice producers](#).

"Now that we have experienced difficulty in ensuring food, it validates the need to support local food production that would ensure steady and sufficient supply of food in times of calamity," said Maria Finesa Cosico, secretary general of the NGO Advocates of Science and Technology for the People, which campaigns on food security and other issues.

Most of those in the agriculture sector, which employs about a quarter of the country's population, are struggling. Many farmers also do not have land to till – or they are mired in rights battles for it.

Frequent movement restrictions have made it impossible to travel to neighbouring areas to find work without permission from village leaders. In Isabela province, farmers going to the city to sell crops can be required to present a negative COVID-19 swab test, which can cost the equivalent of \$60 – about 10 times the average daily [farm wage](#) before the pandemic.

Local community groups continue to try to lend a hand. Nenita Apricio, chairperson of an association of rural women, AMIHAN Isabela, said she has helped farmers set up communal gardens, and distributed farm tools and seed packs.

Other Filipinos have taken food production into their own hands: Urban gardening has begun to flourish in Manila, and community food-sharing projects started early in the pandemic kept some poor neighbourhoods from starving as they waited for government help.

These organic relief efforts have been essential. Apricio said she received only two packs of government relief goods since the start of the pandemic, each containing five kilograms of rice and two cans of sardines. Many farmers she knows have received none.

Someone needs to step in and help, she told The New Humanitarian on a Zoom call, after spending the morning planting string beans.

"I observed that poverty worsened, [especially] after the typhoons," Apricio said. "This will be a long road to recovery."

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