Philippines

Negros Island: hunger besets sugarland

When Bishop Antonio Fortich of Negros Occidental, the Philippines, adresses a gathering of the faithful, he often begins by asking in the local language, "How are you, my people?.

Nowadays, wherever Bishop Fortich speaks to the people of Negros, the crowd respond with the cry, "Gutom no kami!"-"We are hungry."

Visitors to Negros, as island with a population of 3 million, see ample evidence of this. Many of the children show signs of severe malnutrition: matchstick limbs, swollen bellies, sunken eyes. A meal for many families on Negros consists only of thin rice porridge or roasted bananas, and often there is only one meal a day.

The cause of hunger on Negros is not natural disaster or lack of resources. Rather, hunger has resulted largedly from the island's near-total dependence on a single crop, sugar cane.

For the past 30 years the island's sugar mills and plantations have supported nearly the entire population, although at a bare subsistence level. Nearly all the arable land is owned by sugar planters, and most sugar workers have no fields of their own for growing food.

Even in good times, sugar workers on Negros make only about $5 a week, which they use to buy rice and salted fish to eat. Many families survive only by allowing their children to work in the fields as soon as they are big enough to lift a load cane or wield a machete.

Participants in an Oxfam America study tour visited Negros in October 1984. At a meeting of workers planning a campaign to unionize an unorganized hacienda, one worker said "I want a strong union so my children can stay in school It costs 500 pesos a year ($25) to send them, but I earn only seven pesos (35 cents) a ton for loading cane. My son is 12, and he is already a full-time worker. If things don't change, my daughter, too, will have to leave school this year."

The sugar workers have had some organizing success, but the price has been high. Some of the more powerful hacienda owners maintain private armies, which have been used to suppress workers' attempts to organize. When several thousand sugar workers gathered at a peaceful rally last September 20 in the town of Escalante, armed forces under the command of a local sugar planter fired into the crowd killing 22 people.

Negros did not always have a one-crop economy. Sugar was introduced to the island during the Spanish colonial period. The industry grew during 1898-1946 when the Philippines was a colony of the U.S., but food crops were also grown on Negros. After the Cuban revolution in 1959, the U.S. stopped importing sugar from Cuba, and the Philippines was encouraged to increase its sugar exports to fill the gap. Most of the remaining rice and corn land on Negros was then converted to sugar plantations, and the Philippines became the world's fifth largest sugar exportet.

But now the Philippines sugar industry is in a state of collaspe. During the past few years, the world sugar market has become glutted-both with U.S. and European sugar and with export production by Thirld World countries seeking to earn dollars to pay their growing foreign debts.

Menawhile, demand for sugar has fallen because major users, such as soft dring companies, are switching to corn syrup and artificial sweeteners. As a result, many hacienda owners are not bothering to plant cane. Those sugar workers still employed are working only a few days a week.

Few people expect the sugar industry in Negros to recover fully, and people there are aware that an alternative must be developed. One organization working to end hunger on Negros is the National Federation of Sugar Workers(NFSW) a union that represents about 80,000 sugar workers in the Philippines. The NFSW has persuaded hacienda owners to lend about 12,5000 acres of land for the planting of food-crops. Corn, mung beans, peanuts, and other nutritious crops have been planted by some of the co-ops, but many problems must be addressed before the farms can produce significant amounts of food.

Oxfam America has made a grant of $20,000 to the NFSW to pay for seeds, tools, and carabao (water buffalo) for plowing."People ask us what can be done about the problem of the sugar industry," NFSW President Roberto Ortaliz told Oxfam America staff during a visit to Boston last fall. "We say that our problem is the sugar industry. In the long run, the land of Negros should not be used to grow sugar that sugar workers themselves can't afford to buy. The land should be used to grow food for the people of the Philippines."

KATHY McAFEE

editorial note:

We have the same story in nearly every country-where the resources are in the hands of a few. Where personal profit is the goal of many irregardless of the suffering this creates. WHEN WILL WE EVER LEARN!!!