

## Overview

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**L**and is life and life is land.

I would like to start off with an expression of gratitude, in behalf of the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC). We convey our special thanks to the University of the Philippines – to UP President Alfredo Pascual, UP Vice President Prospero “Popoy” de Vera and Dean Danilo Concepcion of the UP College of Law - for graciously hosting the Asian People’s Land Rights Tribunal.

Our gratitude goes out as well to the staff of the various UP offices, the OXFAM East Asia GROW campaign and the Pimentel Center for Local Governance, for assisting ANGOC in the organization of this event.

The roots of civilization have been founded on agriculture and other activities that nurtured the land. But as civilizations thrived, land has become more and more a tool of power, rather than a life source. We need land to grow our food and our forests, to make our homes and forge our communities.

This regard for land is still strongly held by small farmers and fisherfolk, indigenous peoples and rural women, as they coax life from it. And yet they compete with the desire of the more powerful and wealthy to use the land as an economic tool; to extract what they can without giving back to the land or its people.

We tackle the issues of land rights of small holders and land grabbing in this two-day People’s Tribunal. As such, four cases will be presented by the affected community members and their support groups, from Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

The first case features a claim of Filipino farmers, who are beneficiaries under the country’s Comprehensive Agrarian Reform



Program, over the unused portion of the Aurora State College of Agriculture (ASCOT) within the Aurora Pacific Economic Zone or APECO. This is in southern Luzon. The farmers are up against a powerful political clan in this country who wishes to establish Casiguran, Aurora province as a special economic zone.

The second case is the granting of economic land concession to a Cambodian senator and his Thai and United Kingdom investors in the Koh Kong province. Massive land grabbing happened here - up to 40,000 hectares of land - for planting to sugarcane which is sold to one of the most famous cola drinks in the world, among others, when people are displaced from their own lands.

The third case presents a palm oil plantation encroaching into the lands of indigenous peoples and farmers in the Bengay District of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. Again, this involves a huge area, around 17,000 hectares, with countless lives affected, not to mention the destruction of the forest conservation area at Bangay.

Lastly, we will hear from the Mamanwa tribe of Dinarawan, Agusan del Norte in southern Philippines (Mindanao), and their complaints against the mining firm Mindoro Resources Limited, which has the International Finance Corporation (IFC) as an investor. The affected area covers 8,000 hectares around Lake Mainit, a key biodiversity area in the Agusan del Norte province.

These cases have all but exhausted various grievance mechanisms, both at the country and international levels; seeking justice for the violations committed on the peoples' land and human rights. Their cases did not reach a favorable resolution in their countries, thus they come before us, this very Tribunal, to seek new venues to highlight how growing land investment in Asia today are affecting their lives and livelihoods, as well as the environment that sustains the planet.

I would like to introduce again our distinguished tribunal panel members. First is former Senate of the Philippines President Aquilino Pimentel Jr., the father of the country's Local Government Code. Senator Pimentel will be the overall chairperson for the whole process and the chairperson of the Tribunal itself.

The other distinguished members of the Tribunal include: Prof. Sadeka Halim, Commissioner of Rights to Information Commission, Government of Bangladesh; Vice Chairperson Dianto Bachriadi, Commission on Human Rights of the Republic of Indonesia;

Archbishop Antonio Ledesma of Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, a long-time advocate of social justice and agrarian reform in the country; Filomeno Sta. Ana of the Action for Economic Reforms (AER); Chancellor Ray Rovillos, University of the Philippines Baguio; Dean Michael Tan of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines Diliman, who is also a columnist in the Philippine Daily Inquirer; and Professor Dan Gatmaytan, College of Law, University of the Philippines Diliman.

The Tribunal panel and participants will finally agree on a common Declaration which contains the following key points:

- A set of recommendations for the communities and their respective support groups on how they could further defend and protect their rights over their resources; and
- Key principles and proposed mechanisms and strategies for policy intervention at the national and international levels, especially with the ASEAN, as we move towards the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2015.

Land is a most basic right, and should in fact be a human right, because from nurturing land, other fundamental rights are fulfilled. As the Southeast Asian region enters further economic integration towards a caring and sharing community, we need to ask if we are truly caring for the wrong people, and sharing the wrong things.

And as our governments attempt to forge closer economic ties, so should we help our ASEAN communities whose lives are tied to the land itself to deal with these new things and new challenges.