

Filipinos: victims of land seizure

By Bert Brookes

TO THOSE who remember World War II, the Philippines are the group of islands in the Pacific where, early in 1942, the Americans suffered their first defeat at the hands of the rampaging Japanese.

There was high drama when General Douglas MacArthur, America's No. 1 soldier, made his getaway in a small patrol boat under the noses of Japanese warships, vowing "I shall return" — a promise he triumphantly fulfilled two and a half years later.

From the facts about the Philippines given by the Press at the time, the pre-war life-style of the Filipinos seemed only slightly less idyllic than the Garden of Eden — beautiful golden beaches "kissed by the warm Pacific", waving palm trees, wild flowers, butterflies and tropical fish — no wonder MacArthur was determined to return! No doubt everyone else forced to leave their Philippine paradise to escape the invading Japanese had the same long-term intention.

But as is so often the case with the earthly paradises we read about, the reality behind the facade is tragically different.

Wealthy Filipinos may well live in the style of Palm Beach or Acapulco, but for some of the less-wealthy, life could hardly be grimmer.

Indeed, according to a recent report by the Anti-Slavery Society¹ more than six million native Filipinos are today facing something close to genocide. They are the people of about fifty minority groups, or tribes, who are in danger of having what remains of their ancestral lands seized by the government of President Marcos and handed over to "big-business" in the name of economic development.

THE STORY of the Philippines, as told in the report, is the depressingly familiar one of primitive peoples, living directly from the soil, being steadily deprived of their lands, their livelihoods and their economic independence by the relentless advance of invaders from the developed world.

● First it was the Spaniards who, after the "discovery" of the islands by Magellan in 1521, established an autocratic colonial rule. The best land was commandeered, large estates (haciendas) established and tribute was exacted from the natives, many of whom, now dispossessed of their lands, were turned into ill-paid workers on the Spaniards' tobacco,

sugar, hemp and indigo plantations.

It was an archetypal colonial take-over whose success rested largely on the co-operation of a Filipino elite (the *ilustrados*) with whom the Spaniards shared the spoils. At the other extreme were those native tribes who stoutly resisted the invaders and fought long and tenaciously to retain their ancestral lands. The descendants of those tribes, now numbering 6.5 million, still maintain their communities and their traditional cultures.

● In 1898, by the Treaty of Paris, the Americans took over from the Spaniards. Despite claiming to come "not as invaders or conquerors but as friends",² they brought in troops — 126,000 at one time — to quell



● President Marcos

resistance and to stamp their sovereignty over the whole country.

The Americans' task was considerably eased by the co-operation of the *ilustrados* who, it seems, had good reason for co-operating. Under the Treaty of Paris they were allowed to retain the haciendas and other landholdings granted to them by the Spaniards.

To the ordinary Filipino tribes, however, the Americans handed out, not welcoming handshakes but harsh body-blows.

● First, there was the Land Registration Act of 1902. To obtain title to land under the Act, the occupier was required to have formal surveys made and to carry out certain legal procedures. The surveys cost money and the procedures were difficult for the uneducated to follow.

The Act became a charter for the more educated Filipinos and American land speculators; they were able to make claims for land occupied by the poorer classes. Thus, almost all the titles granted under the Act were for large private estates.

For the natives, worse was to follow.

● The Public Land Act of 1905 declared to be "public land" any land not registered under the 1902 Act. The ancestral lands of the tribespeople became liable to take-over and exploitation by the government or its nominees.

The national minorities had become squatters on their own land.

THE TWO ACTS were the signal for the huge wave of commercial exploitation of the Philippines that was to take place in the 20th century, both before independence (1946) and after.

The protagonists were American and Japanese big-business, hand-in-hand with successive Philippine governments who did not hesitate to use the armed forces to crush opposition.

Since World War II, much of the finance has been provided by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

● There has been gold-mining, the concessions for which involved whole tribes being ejected to make way for American prospectors.

● There has been large-scale logging which led to denudation and erosion and which is continuing at a rate of 170,000 hectares a year. Many concessions encroach upon or completely swallow up the lands of the minority groups.

● There is the government's electrical power generation programme

which involves the construction of forty dams over the next twenty years. Almost all will be built on the land of the minorities whose best farm land will end up under many feet of water. Over one and a half million tribespeople will be made homeless. The projects already started are causing major unrest, especially as the rural poor do not have the resources to take advantage of electrification when it comes. The main benefits of the programme will accrue to the big landowners.

● Land is progressively taken over for the commercial growing of sugarcane, coconuts and fruit. In 1978 alone nearly 500,000 hectares were commandeered. Prominent among the big-business invaders have been the multi-national fruit corporations – Del Monte, Castle & Cooke and United Fruit.

THE ENCOURAGEMENT of big-business and the forcible dispossession of the minorities increased to a new level of intensity during the eight years of martial law (1972-81) imposed by President Marcos.

Violence, intimidation, torture and murder were used to put down resistance. Trade union activity was curbed by decree and strikes were outlawed.

These conditions, plus the fact that workers' wages were low and that there was a large pool of unemployed, were all advertised abroad as inducements to foreign investment.

As the Marcos policy proceeds, so the national minorities are squeezed further and further into their dwindling ancestral lands or are forcibly uprooted and "rehabilitated" in reservations far from their original homelands. Today, there are few viable areas to which the minorities can fall back. Four tribes – the Tagakaolos, Mandayas, Bukidnons and Manobos – have already exhausted all possible areas for retreat and have now settled for impoverished lives as plantation workers and tenant farmers. Inevitably, other tribes will follow before long.

In 1972, in a bid to spike the guns of the growing anti-Marcos nationalist movements, the President announced a plan for land reform. This required all lands planted to rice and corn with an area of seven hectares or more to be taken over and divided among tenants, each of whom was to get at least three hectares. Landlords were to be compensated by the tenant with the value of two and a half times the average harvest over three years.

For a number of obvious reasons, the reform proved a complete flop.

● It applied only to land growing rice and corn, and landlords were able to dodge the provisions of the reform by switching to export crops.

● It did nothing for the 200,000 to 250,000 tenant families working sugar and coconut land.

● It did nothing for the three million landless peasants.

● The stipulated compensation was more than most tenants were prepared to hand over, and many abandoned their claims.

The result has been that, up to 1977, only one-third of one per cent of the land covered by the reform had actually been transferred.

WHO IS to blame for the shameful treatment of the Philippine minorities and for the bitterness and burning resentment that grips those 6.5 million people to-day?

In the Anti-Slavery Society's report, President Marcos is cast as the villain of the piece, but his defenders would, no doubt, claim that his programme of developing the country's natural resources is positive and progressive and that, in any event, he has merely been continuing the policies of successive governments since 1898.

Perhaps the year 1898 is the key to the moral turpitude that has darkened the Philippine social landscape during the 20th century. Perhaps the American government at that time has much to answer for. By 1898 the revelations of Henry George in *Progress and Poverty* were common knowledge. The government of his own country could not have been ignorant of the injustice generated by the private ownership of land – or, more precisely, the private appropriation of land rent.

In taking over the Philippines from the Spaniards, the Americans could have proved that they came "as friends" by introducing, not their grossly one-sided Land Acts of 1902 and 1905, but measures designed to establish the right of all Filipinos to share in the benefits of their country's natural wealth.

Had the taxation of land values been introduced into the Philippines then, the unseemly land-grabbing of the 20th century, with all its monstrous consequences for man's inhumanity to man, would surely never have occurred.

REFERENCES

1. *The Philippines – Authoritarian government, multinationals and ancestral lands.* The Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights, London SW9.
2. Proclamation by President McKinley, 21 December 1898.

INDIA

● From P.11

stitution and for the period 1978 to 1983, Rs 250 million were allocated for the rehabilitation of bonded labourers. To-date, only about Rs 5,000,000, have actually been used.

India's urban growth during the last two decades created a demand for building materials and this demand was increased by the ASIAD Games held in Delhi last winter.

The capital's brick kilns grew from 150 to 400 in a single year; construction work had to be completed by the Prime Minister's birthday and the time element led to abuses.

Debt bondage appeared on the construction sites of the capital and increased in the brick kilns.

The Bonded Liberation Front has for some years been rescuing bonded labourers from brick kilns – where armed guards are the norm – and runs its own schemes in an effort to provide work for those it helps to escape.

Bonded labourers in the kilns usually work as a family, not as individuals, and they may be sold by one kiln owner to another. The going rate in part of Haryana, where much of the brick industry is found, is between Rs 2,500 and Rs 7,500.

LAST YEAR the Anti-Slavery Society told the Working Group on Slavery about Ravi. He was 13 when his father, Ditta, bonded him to a rich farmer for a year for a loan of Rs 500.

Ravi starts work at 5 a.m. every day, never has any time off and his "wages" are two meals a day and some clothes.

Ditta said: "We had nothing, only our labour. This is the sixth year of the drought. So there's little work. No food. No money".

Ditta was conscious that in order to redeem Ravi at the end of the twelve months "somebody else will have to be bonded... maybe I have to go into bondage myself".

Swami Agnivesh has personal knowledge of people being bonded for six or seven generations – for an original loan of as little as £5.

*Supplementary Convention of the abolition of slavery, the slave trade and institutions and practices similar to slavery, 1956.

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