Rufina and Tia Lilia: Sagas of Poverty, Hardship and Survival

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Since the last quarter of 1983, the Philippines has been through an unprecedented state of socio-economic and political change. Political developments since the assassination of the country's leading oppositionist, Benigno Aquino, have increased the dualistic structure of Philippine society and risky concentration of power at the centre. Behind this process, commercialism and the interests of the elite are the factors moving toward the establishment of the country's authoritarian regime. The ensuing neglect, abuses and disregard for human rights have resulted in a loss of faith in the state. In the two years of intensifying political and economic insurgency, a deteriorating peace and order situation had become an important variable in the stability surrounding President Marcos' regime. Increased militarization and use of repressive instruments of the Philippine government led to rapid polarization of the Filipines and the phenomenal growth of the Communist dissidents.

The Philippine economic order under martial law increased the wealth of a few Filipinos who brought out of the country a substantial part of their ill-gotten riches, draining the nation's resources for development. On the other hand, Philippine agricultural and rural development was neglected. In Negros island, located in south-central Philippines, the wholesale dependence of the province on sugar production — its lifeblood — has led to massive labour displacement, widespread incidence of absolute poverty and hunger. The collapse of sugar prices since 1983, and contraction of the market following decades of exploitation and excesses of the once powerful 

hacenderos, have made masses of displaced peasants and unemployed workers ready recruits for the Communist insurgency. In a span of a few years, the dissident movement has grown rapidly, members of the New People's Army (NPA), the military wing of the banned Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), now enter and leave Negros under cover and freely roam sugar-cane fields just outside city limits.

Rufina

The escalating NPA-military conflict in the countryside of Negros which continued under the Aquino regime, forced a number of small rice-growers in militarized zones to flee into the capital city, Bacolod. The two cases presented in these pages reflect an unstable state of socio-economic and political affairs in Negros. Among the growing number of migrants is Rufina and her household.

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Rufina could cry no more. In a short span of two months, she has lost a five-month-old baby and a child of two — victims of the raging crisis. Since December, Rufina has known no rest. Pushed out of her barrio with her family of seven because of the NPA-military conflict, she has become part of the flotsam of people constantly in search of scarce farming jobs and free patches of land for tenancy. "Lisud gid pero nano kay amo ang among pangabuhi" (It is hard but this is our life).

From birth, Rufina has known nothing but hardship. Born to parents who are landless peasants, Rufina could not remember a time when her family had not been in debt. Getting enough money for food and clothing from one harvest to another was the all-absorbing, never-solved problem. "That's why I never managed to go to school beyond Grade 2. My Father could not spare money for notebooks and pencil, let alone a new dress I could wear for school." Working as tenants in an upland region of rocky, northern Negros, Rufina's parents barely produced enough crops to sell. Though food was always available to Rufina and her siblings, it was always the same fare — boiled green bananas and sweet potatoes, or in better days, grated corn. Rice was a luxury, enjoyed only during harvest time when her family's corn produce was sold and the cash thus obtained used to buy rice. Confined to steep and denuded land, rice was an impossible crop to grow in their farm-lot.

Faced with their perennial cash shortage, Rufina volunteered to leave home at the young age of 14 and work as yaya (live-in sitter) of a Chinese child. Given free board and lodging, Rufina did not mind the low pay of 18 pesos a month (US90 cents) for the steady cash and gaiety of city life in Bacolod. For five years, Rufina worked with the Chinese family and seasonally remitted money to her parents. After turning 19, she had had enough of domestic work. She decided to return to farming, away from the constant nagging of her amo (master). But having tasted city life, Rufina found it hard to turn down a friend's invitation to go to Manila with her. Thus three years after she returned home, at age 22, she dared explore beyond Negros island, crossing the sea for the first time to work as a housemaid for a physician's family in Manila. Being a great distance away from home, however, her parents never ceased to admonish her to return home. "They kept asking me why I could not stay put and settle down like the other solteras (single women) in our village." After three and a half years of working in Manila, Rufina was finally persuaded to go home by her parents. "I actually intended to simply take a much-needed break, then return again to Manila. But my savings which I brought home with me soon ran out. I was obliged by tradition to be generous to all relations who came to visit me — to shell out even just a peso or so. I really wanted to keep some money for my return trip but I never managed to do so ... Then of course a man I was closely attracted to became very interested in me. Being past 20, I thought it best to settle down, lest I become a laon (old maid) ... We stayed in Bayawan for four years. In the process, I had my first three children. They came nearly one after another, I rarely have rest!"

At the peak of sugar prices in the world market in the late seventies, Rufina and her husband were forced to leave Bayawan, their homeland, after the owner of the land they were jointly working with her parents decided to convert it all to sugar-cane. Through recommendation of some friends, the couple decided to migrate to Hinobaan, in the far south of Negros. In an interior barrio of this remote town, Rufina and her husband, with their three children in tow, presented themselves to a riceland owner as tenants. Fired with the hope of having finally found a settlement of their