

Another War

MOISES S. GARCIA, JR.

Before Osama Bin Laden became the most wanted man on the planet and Afghanistan the testing ground for the latest in cutting-edge US military hardware, Batangas, an agricultural province of sandy beaches and hill orchards south of Manila, was already losing a war. The war was not against terrorism but the final body count will be just as horrifying.

"I know all the drug pushers here," said the local drunk Robert, making like he was about to throw a lasso when he said "here."

Approaching lunchtime this claim sounded plausible but then anything would sound plausible in this April heat. Anything to get under a shade, I thought. I would believe this man. He was in a drinking session when I arrived. It appeared that the depth of poverty is directly proportional to happy. Here in Balete, drinking started shortly after breakfast.

"They make the shabu just outside this place," he added, now pointing upwards to the east, near the public elementary school. I nodded again and looking up saw a row of busted street lamps. I was not about to disagree with this man or pursue this line of questioning. I was thinking about the old woman who served lunch the day before. Drug trafficking was old news here in Batangas City.

I was staying at a friend's house in Taal located along the national highway, 30 minutes west of Batangas City. My friend told me that shabu was sold here and anyone unafraid (or unaware) of the death penalty and has a house by the road can invest in the lucrative "retail" trade. Not completely convinced the neighbors were working for the Hong Kong triad, I waited for the rest of Taal to fall asleep and from the balcony window watched the house across the road. From midnight to two in the morning no less than 10 sports utility vehicles stopped for no more than two minutes before speeding off to the direction of Lemery further west.

The Port of No Return

Seven years ago Balete became the new address of former residents of Barangay Sta. Clara, home of the old Batangas Port. That year the

Philippine government concluded negotiations with the people of Sta. Clara to resettle them.

As early as the 1970s the port was eyed for expansion — a major one. The new port would become the second biggest port in the country next to the port of Manila.

In June 1994, a team of policemen, army personnel and convicts from Muntinlupa arrived by sea. The people of Sta. Clara would have preferred to greet them the way the Germans did Allied troops on the beaches of Normandy but they were quickly overwhelmed by the morning siege.

With brutal efficiency uncharacteristic of civil servants, the last house was demolished within minutes. The government exercise was a success. The vigilant and determined, the residents were no match against the armed and relentless demolition crew. Shortly after sunrise, a team of engineers arrived to break ground. Day One of Phase I.

Several months before the violent expulsion, a group of residents decided to take the money and run. The "money" government offered was P35,000.00 (some said it was P15,000.00), a substantial amount in pre-Asian crisis Batangas City) and the place to run to was a choice of two relocation sites, Balete and San Jose Sico. Twelve months of free groceries were thrown in to sweeten the deal. There was also the promise of employment and livelihood, "preferential" of course, as soon as the new port opens. Those who found the offer too insulting fortified Sta. Clara and prepared for the worst.

Saving Sta. Clara

Only the government calls the residents squatters. No less than then President Fidel V. Ramos declared them so in order to satisfy the legal conscience of Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), the funding agency of the expansion project.

I was inclined to call them squatters as well. What remained of Sta. Clara just beyond the walls of the Batangas International Port did look like a squatter colony. Houses were built on blackened earth and constantly surrounded with enormous flies. Houses were only a foot apart and inside these were the survivors, some more desperate than others. The little space in between dwellings was occupied by laundry hanging to dry. Most of the houses were on stilts, suggesting the area was flood prone. Underneath each house was a private sanitary landfill.

I would be later told that this part of Batangas City was Tondo of a parallel universe and I was very fortunate to exit unscathed. Batangas City is in fact similar to Metro Manila in many respects. It has the pollution, the heavy traffic, and the smiling Jollibee mascot of the popular food chain. There was also prostitution and drug trafficking. Sta. Clara woke up each morning to news of a death from a friendly quarrel among gin drinkers or a routine police raid.

Thelma and the Corpse

On my visit there was death in the air, literally. A woman was dead and relatives could not afford a funeral. The corpse had been undisturbed for 48 hours and concerned relatives were looking for Thelma Maranan. Her name came up often during my visit to Balete and San Jose Sico.

We found her in the Barangay Hall being interviewed by a Japanese accompanied by an interpreter. From a distance Thelma Maranan, who looked like a sun-burnt food critic, Doreen Fernandez, looked like she was housebreaking a pet.

A veteran of the Sta. Clara wars, Maranan was well respected and well-loved. The color and texture of her skin were evidence of her decade-long battle with the government. According to other people, however, Maranan was a fraud.

Maranan brought together the residents to form an association, the Kalipunan ng mga Nagkaisang Mamamayan ng Sta. Clara, the "voice" of the barangay during negotiations with the government. She demanded that the people get their jobs back and no demolition. Demolition was what they got.

Another demolition was coming. As soon as the government and certain landowners reach an agreement, construction giants F.F. Cruz and Shimizu Corp., winners of a controversial bidding, will proceed with Phase II. Phase II will wipe out Sta. Clara and everything else within the 130 hectares of the existing port. According to an engineer at F.F. Cruz, there were a few more small details to be reviewed and "it's all systems go." One "small detail" concerned expropriation.

A Batangas Court valued a 13.2-hectare portion of the project site at P5,705 per square meter and JBIC was told it would cost only P200. JBIC was also told Phase I would only affect "squatters" or a few hundred fishing families in Sta. Clara and these families were to receive a generous compensation package.

Should the ruling be enforced expropriation alone would cost a ridiculous P7.15 billion. The total Phase II contract was worth only P2.85 billion.

To her Japanese guest Maranan explained the devastating effects of development projects funded by misinformed foreign governments. She said the Batangas International Port will not improve lives in the short and long term. The proliferation of squatters was only the beginning.

The Japanese was jotting this down, his interpreter repeating Maranan's point in Japanese. Maranan noticed his difficulty in the translation, stopped speaking and fanned herself. She went on to say something about the history to development projects.

This was old news. Maranan aged a little retelling it. They had yet to tell her about the corpse.

The Promise Land

Balete was an hour away from Sta. Clara. Trucks carried off the residents and what was salvaged from their old houses and old lives to their new homes. Upon arrival, they found the second half of the nightmare unfolding. There were no houses on this two-hectare grassland called Balete. In the first 24 hours of their new life, and the day would not be complete without heavy rains, the people of Sta. Clara were bitter and inconsolable.

Their situation improved slightly when the government decided to honor part of the relocation deal. Residents were awarded houses that were no more than bamboo waiting sheds. Walls, doors, flooring, toilets and everything else had to be improvised.

The groceries came. Some of the brands of instant food were unfamiliar. The familiar ones were past expiration dates. The rice, guaranteed for 12 months, was black, turning gray after several washings. The groceries and rice rolled in for three months. The starving were actually relieved.

San Jose Sico was farther away and required three rides to get to. It was a true relocation site. It was already the home of the "stadium people," Batangueños who were evicted when a new sports stadium was built for the Palarong Pambansa in the 1980s. It was also the site of the Batangas City Jail.

Unlike in Balete, there was an existing road system and ready lots for the new batch of residents if they could afford to build something on them.

The new residents of Balete were persistent. Persistence netted Balete a water tower and 10 water pumps in 1996. A new governor donated a basketball court and partially paved roads.

San Jose Sico was still waiting for water pumps but the need for these was not pressing. According to one resident, the water from the deep wells was oily. Residents were already buying water from nearby purified water stations. They would rather have cheaper electricity.

Over the years, Balete acquired improvements, mostly from campaigning politicians. Today portions of it can be mistaken for a middle-class subdivision. There was a section of well-built houses opposite the resettlement area. The word was more than half of the original Sta. Clara residents had sold their lots cheap to live elsewhere. Many crawled back to Sta. Clara for a reunion with resentful relatives. Of those who remained, many have been unemployed for the past seven years.

Going Nowhere Fast

The children of Balete were coming back from school. They will be flying kites and climbing trees as soon as they finish lunch.

"Many of these children will not go to college," I told Robert who was now slightly less drunk. It was his turn to nod.

The adults were no longer optimistic. There was a growing number of youths just out of high school who were living an inherited way of life. They too were already drinking. The only difference was that they played basketball in the afternoon while the adults slept away their hangovers. There were colleges and learning institutions nearby but unemployed parents simply could not afford higher education.

Employment was the worst of the government's broken promises. When the new port opened jobs were available but only to the highly skilled. The contractors imported labor from the other islands.

The old ways of earning a living were no longer available. In the days of the old port, the men, women and children of Sta. Clara boarded newly docked vessels, carrying with them cigarette packs, soft drinks, sandwiches, souvenirs and "entertainment" for tourists. A tip for carrying luggage was worth at least one meal. A day's work was in earned in an hour or two.

Now there were restaurants and shops inside the port. Only uniformed port employees can board vessels and offer services. Every tip was accounted for.

Those still living in Sta. Clara had managed to survive despite the very few legitimate businesses opportunities. An alarming number of teenagers have become part of the drug trade. Balete and San Jose Sico residents were getting by, probably by drinking and smashing street lamps.

Mang Tito, a former dockworker, opened the only barbershop in Balete. He charged P25 a haircut but was often paid in kind, if at all. I asked him if given the choice he would return to Sta. Clara. He was quick to answer this.

"No. That life is over."

The Deep Blue

In June 1999, the MV Jurong Bauhina, a Singapore registered vessel on her maiden voyage to the Philippines, reached the port of Batangas. Captain and crew, happy to arrive safely, were surprised to find the port fully equipped. Indeed the port was complete with domestic and foreign cargo berths, multipurpose berths, ferry, fast craft berths and transit shed for handling all types of cargo. This was not the port they heard about.

Should the MV Jurong Bauhina return in five years, it would find the port almost unrecognizable, the facilities alone occupying more than five times its present area. By the completion of the second phase of the Batangas Port Development Project there will be two more foreign container cargo berths, a general cargo berth with provision for a container freight station, a terminal building, an access road to the South Luzon Expressway, open storage areas and other facilities. All state of the art.

By then Sta. Clara will be only a ghost of a barangay or the memory of a ghost.

An old woman puts out her cigarette.

She's boarding up the carinderia. The last customer left two hours ago. As the sun sets behind the walls of the port she counts her earnings for the day. A pack of cigarette's worth. She will to see the second exodus. The cigarettes were not killing her fast enough. ☉