

## THE KIDAPAWAN MASSACRE: DISASTER UPON DISASTER

When big agribusiness displaces our farmers, they call it development. When farmers assemble to rally for their rights, they call it disruption. And when the police open fire upon them, they call it defense.

No. It cannot be called anything else but a disaster. The farmers were already experiencing disaster-level drought conditions. It has already heightened the perennial disaster of hunger and poverty. But it is when man brings disaster upon disaster on his fellow men that is the worst of all. The claim of defense for committing a massacre just doesn't hold water.

We at the Citizens' Disaster Response Center (CDRC) is aghast at the injustice done to the protesting farmers of Kidapawan. Already deprived of their basic human right to food and water by the El Niño-induced drought, they were treated as enemies. The police are even peddling the possibility of those killed as communist rebels to lend legitimacy to their decision to shoot. The succeeding investigation has not yielded any weapons among the farmers, however. Because they were just that: farmers asking for help.

CDRC's partner organizations in SOCCSKSARGEN and Cagayan Valley report that the regions received lower-than-normal rainfall since October 2015. The Philippine weather bureau PAGASA early last year alerted the public to prepare for the effects of a dry spell that is forecast to affect 32 provinces. According to local and international weather bureaus, the 2015-2016 El Niño may be worse than the 1997-1998 phenomenon. Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan on December last year said that President Benigno Aquino III approved a P19 billion budget to combat the effects of El Niño, which may last until May 2016. The drought conditions could extend to June 2016.

In previous episodes of drought, pest infestation followed, bringing the agricultural sector down to its knees. Given the above forecasts by PAGASA, and even with an approved budget in December 2015, inadequate mitigation interventions were done. Thus, it is not surprising that the farmers decided to demand that the state address their plight.

We strongly condemn the violence employed by the local police and the hostility of North Cotabato Governor Emmylou Talino-Mendoza towards their constituents. We call on all Filipinos to take a stand against impunity even as the policemen who perpetrated the crime were given medals by the local government. We are pushing for an impartial investigation of the massacre and take action against those who were responsible for the death of three farmers and injury of dozens more, including women and children.

Furthermore, we ask that the government ensure the safety of farmers and our partner organizations that are at present distributing relief goods. It has come to our attention that some members of the military and police are barring them from doing so which constitutes harassment.

We appeal to our people and the international community to help in the relief efforts for the beleaguered farmers. We have put out an appeal for donations. Please click [here](#) for details.

North Cotabato is but one among 36 provinces affected by the prolonged El Niño. The thousands who marched in Kidapawan are just part of the 121,490 farmers affected by the drought as reported by the Department of Agriculture. With Climate Change expected to bring in more intense typhoons, rising sea levels and others, we can expect more intolerable levels of hardships ahead.

This calls for decisive state action, no less.