

Indigenous organization under constant harassment and threats, calls for the pulling out of a palm oil plantation project in their community

A indigenous community organization is under threat for resisting land grabbing carried out by a giant palm oil company, A. Brown, in Opol, Misamis Oriental, Philippines.

The organization, Pangalasag (literally means 'indigenous shield'), is objecting the entry of A. Brown Company which will replace their farms, planted with banana, coconut and other crops, with palm oil. The farmers, who are from Higaonon tribe of the Mindanao Lumads (indigenous peoples), demand for the withdrawal of the project which did not even secure their Free, Prior and Informed Consent.

Members of Pangalasag reported to Kalumbay Regional Lumad Organization on September 24, 2011 that they are being harassed and intimidated unceasingly by the company. They have been subjected to a repeated cycle of persecution since A. Brown came to their place in the last quarter of 2010. Their officers have been put under surveillance and reported that they have been harassed lately through text messages, and were maltreated by company guards.

The company's systematic violation of their rights has been left unnoticed because of the place's severe isolation, and the low literacy level of the victims to seek redress in courts.

On March 10, 2011, at around 11 in the morning, Pangalasag members Edwin Baranggot, Jemar Armilla, Fausto Magpulong, Raul Magpulong, Jose Paborada, Dante Paborada and Ruel Tagupa headed out to gather 'bagacay,' a kind of bamboo. However, they could not proceed to their intended destination since they were barred by guards of the A. Brown Company which is starting an oil palm plantation in the said area.

The farmers proceeded to their temporary shelter at Sitio Limpasan in Barangay Tingalan, Opol, Misamis Oriental to rest. After almost an hour later, a dump truck, two pick-up trucks and a jeep arrived. One of the jeep's passengers ordered the farmers not to run. The command was followed by a series of gun fire aimed at the farmers who scattered. Fausto Magpulong, Jose and Dante Paborada, and Ruel Tagupa were able to flee. Edwin Baranggot and Jemar Armilla, however, were caught by the assailants.

Armilla, who headed towards a grassy area to hide, was taken at gunpoint. The man holding his gun even taunted him saying, "Let us just kill him. He will just rot, nobody would look for him." Another person handcuffed Armilla. The assailants introduced themselves to be members of the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI).

Edwin Baranggot who was hiding nearby surrendered himself after he saw the man pointing a gun at Armilla. He was also handcuffed and was even punched on his leg. Both Baranggot and Armilla were then brought to the Opol Police Station where they were detained for two hours while their captors ate lunch. One of the alleged NBI agents, not content with what they have done to the farmers, punched Armilla on his chest thrice.

Baranggot and Armilla were transferred to the NBI office at the Provincial Capitol Grounds in Cagayan de Oro City where they were further detained for one night and a day. Ironically, despite of being the victims of physical and verbal abuse, they were charged by the National Bureau of Investigation of Direct Assault.

Presently, the two who were released after posting bail, together with the other farmers who were with them that day, continue to protest the trumped-up charges against their group.

