

Kamukhaan Revisited: Heaven's Antidote to Pesticide Poisoning

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Digos City, Davao del Sur— While carving a thin bamboo strip into letters that would eventually form into the words “No to Pesticides” and pasted onto a native bracelet made out of polished coconut shell, a young man tells the grisly story of how he almost lost his leg due to a huge wound that has been festering above his right ankle for three years now.

Ramil Murillo, 25, is one of the hundreds of impoverished residents of Kamukhaan, an indigenous Manobo village proven by studies to be heavily exposed to pesticide use by an adjacent banana plantation.

Since 1997, various non-governmental organizations and government agencies have detected and documented in Kamukhaan several adverse environmental and health effects of agro-chemicals used by the company to grow bananas exported out of the country.



Kamukhaan is an impoverished village heavily exposed to pesticides.

Almost seven years later, ground and aerial spraying of pesticides continue unabated, forcing some enlightened residents to flee in search of a different livelihood, or else find a more creative means of earning a living rather than going to the banana plantation for work as was previously their only choice.

Such enlightened residents of Kamukhaan has joined a group they call “Langit” (Lunduyan ng Alternatibo at Natural na Gamot Para sa Ikauunlad ng Tao) or “Heaven” (Sanctuary of Alternative and Natural Medicine for People’s Development), in hopes that they would one day finally be given a chance to experience a piece of heaven on earth like their ancestors did, a long time ago when the land, sea and air were toxics-free.

Still poisoned

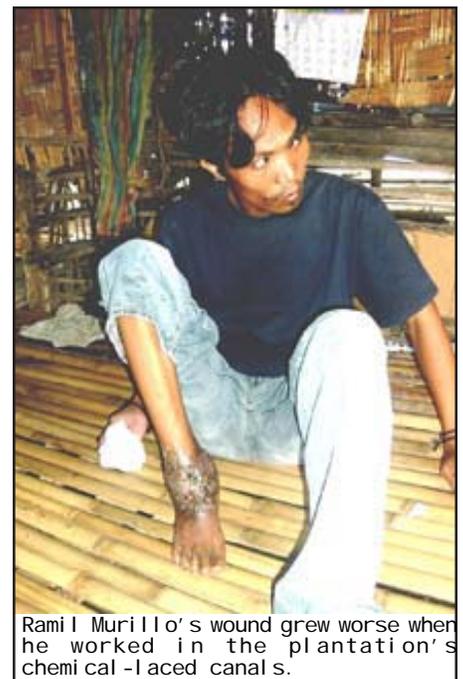
Ramil, a leader of the youth group Anakbayan, still recalls the day when the company’s *chief operating officer* approached him inside the village to volunteer

that the company would treat the wound on his leg. Ramil reckoned that he got the leg wound from getting wood in the company’s pesticide-laden premises offered free by the company, which was trying its best to woo residents after coming under attack for its pesticide use.

When his wound slightly healed from the company-sponsored operation, Ramil went to work in the banana plantation under a five-month contract from May to November 2003. However, his wound only grew worse as it was exposed to chemicals in his work at the canals. The company then suggested that he have his leg amputated, but Ramil refused since he was not presented any such recommendation from an orthopaedic doctor.

Unable to walk, he now spends his time creating handicrafts for Langit, after attending a handicrafts training last August 2005, along with other Kamukhaan residents. He says that his condition is better now, and regrets that he ever worked for the banana plantation. “I wish I hadn’t worked in the plantation, if I only knew that this would happen to me,” he said, while wiping the pus from his wound with a white cloth.

Monitoring done by Pesticide Action Network Philippines since 1997, as well as an international fact-finding mission held last February 2003, has shown that more than twenty pesticides have been used by the banana plantation since the 1980s. Some of these pesticides have been identified as Paraquat, Mancozeb, Maneb, Carbofuran,



Ramil Murillo’s wound grew worse when he worked in the plantation’s chemical-laced canals.

Glyphosate and Diazinon. While these pesticides are approved for use by the Fertilizer and Pesticide Authority, there is abundant scientific proof in the international community that they pose significant health and environmental risks, and some have already been banned in some countries.

Villagers have complained of acute symptoms of poisoning caused by an aerial drift of pesticides (spraying by airplane is usually done twice a week). Aside from acute symptoms, pesticide exposure has also been found likely to have caused a variety of chronic health effects among the residents, including cancers, thyroid disease, neurologic and reproductive effects, congenital abnormalities, respiratory and skin disorders, and impairment of immune function.

Exposure is particularly high among agricultural workers in the banana plantation who work directly with the chemicals. Traditionally, farming and fishing were the villagers' main source of income. But environmental pollution, which has made the land sterile and fishkills rampant, has forced most of the villagers to rely on work for the plantation or else starve.

Dante Borja, 18, was forced to stop schooling when he was in third grade because allergies frequently broke out on his skin. He said that he frequently inhaled pesticide spray on his way to school. Like Ramil, he has a wound on his left calf that wouldn't heal. His father, he said, fishes in the sea for a living, but only harvests an average of six cups of shrimps everyday. A cup of shrimp in the market sells for P10 (US\$0.20), and so Dante's family of five have to live on a daily income of P60 (US\$1.00).

Like Ramil, Dante is now learning how to do handicrafts, hoping that he could somehow augment his family's income, as well as learn more about the community's social condition through his peers at Langit.

Aside from making handicrafts being sold in international conferences and elsewhere, Langit is also busy setting up a herbal medicine community farm. Both initiatives at providing alternative livelihood is being supported by



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Stichting K.O.O.K., a Netherlands-based cause-oriented group, Pesticide Action Network Asia Pacific, and some individual donors.

Alternative livelihood

At a mountainous piece of land in Brgy. Soong about 25 kilometres from Kamukhaan, lives former Kamukhaan resident Michael Baquiran, his wife, and six children. Michael, 33, who worked in the plantation for 10 years, is now growing herbal medicine and other crops for Langit. His mother, Alberta, was one of PAN Philippines first patients, and died in 1998 of an enlarged thyroid.

He said that he transferred from Kamukhaan two years ago, when he was harassed by the company to dissociate himself from PAN Philippines and Namangka, a local fisherfolk group which he was a member of. But he stood up for the organizations which, according to Michael, helped him understand the connection between the fishkills and pesticide spraying that he was previously ignorant of. He couldn't be happier now that he is now able to plant taro and corn to feed his family, unlike in Kamukhaan "where nothing grows," he said. He has also been able to harvest and process lemon grass.



Aerial spraying of pesticides is usually done twice a week. Villagers complain of acute poisoning symptoms every time spraying occurs.

Meanwhile, in nearby Brgy. Kapatagan, Kamukhaan residents Angelito Diamona and Ben Baquiran look after a two hectare land recently donated to Langit by a private donor. Medicinal plants such as citronella, blumea, vitex, moringa, mint, lemongrass, and others have started to grow. Langit hopes to eventually process the plants into essential oils and medicinal products to be sold in the market.

Angelito, 26, used to work in the plantation as a harvester who injects pesticides into banana buds. He

recalled that his eyes stung every time the spray hit him. He narrated that his eldest child only began to speak at the age of four, and his second eldest child began to speak at the age of three. Three of his four children have asthma attacks about twice a year.

He is concerned about the health of his pregnant wife, who continues to stay in Kamukhaan along with the rest of his family. Angelito wishes to bring his whole family to Brgy. Kapatagan instead. "It is better here where there are no poisons," he mused.

Ben, 42, also used to be a canal worker in the plantation, but didn't wish to renew his five-month contract after his right leg swelled after a month of working in chemical-laced waters.

Like Angelito, he is planning to pull his wife and five children out of Kamukhaan and start anew by the next school year. He hopes his children would perform better in school away from the plantation. He admitted that teachers have been complaining of his children's slow learning abilities. Staying in Kamukhaan "is like committing suicide," he added.

Continuous monitoring

Kamukhaan residents are grateful that continuous support from the national and international community has helped them survive and speak of the tragedy of pesticide poisoning. However, they are aware of the need to expand and strengthen their ranks in order to be able to resist what they claim as the company's tactics of bullying them into silence.

"More work is needed to highlight the responsibility of pesticides manufacturers and the banana plantation owners in order to prevent further damage to health and the environment," said Cecinio Pelletero, secretary-general of Cause-DS (Citizens Action Unified for



Michael Baquiran transferred from Kamukhaan two years ago and is now working at Langit's herbal medicine community farm.

Sectoral Empowerment-Digos), a local multi-sectoral group that has been working closely with the Kamukhaan residents.

An even more comprehensive monitoring that includes a deeper health investigation of community members and environmental assessment is being planned by PAN Philippines and Cause-DS when additional resources become available.

It is evident that in impoverished agricultural countries like the Philippines caught within a liberalized global economic framework, the conditions of pesticides use make "safe use" impossible. Huge tracts of land are increasingly concentrated in the hands of corporations running export-oriented plantations aimed solely at profiteering, with little or no regard for the protection of human life, land and natural resources.

In Mindanao (Southern Philippines) alone, several banana plantations are presently expanding, rendering farmers landless and posing threats to the general public due to the contamination of protected watershed areas.

This widespread poisoning of communities also manifests the accountability of Western producers and sellers of pesticides that falsely insist on the safety of their products and lobby hard to elude government regulation especially in developing countries.

Fortunately, agro-chemical disasters such as found in Kamukhaan are made surmountable by the bravery and willingness of a united people to fight and search for the antidote not just for their own poisoned lives, but for society's perpetuating poisons of injustice and oppression.

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Residents of Kamukhaan are now turning to handicrafts to augment their income and escape from hazardous work at the plantation.