KAMUKHAAN

REPORT ON A POISONED VILLAGE

Written by Ilang Ilang Quijano

Edited by Jennifer Mourin

Published by Pesticide Action Network (PAN) Asia and the Pacific, December 2002

The place is so barren and desolate, one would think that it was abandoned, except that the shabby huts and its impoverished inhabitants are impossible to miss.

This is Kamukhaan, a community of 150 families in Davao del Sur, Mindanao, Philippines, whose people and land have been facing a slow but certain death due to heavy exposure to pesticides over the past nineteen years. The entry of the LADECO banana plantation situated right next to it in 1981 marked the genesis of poisoning, sickness and poverty.

Since then, the village has been subjected to large doses of pesticides the plantation utilizes for its own benefit. Through constant aerial and ground spraying, the people have been in direct contact with these chemicals for years, both their health and living environment withering under their deadly mist. And while the perfectly healthy and unscathed bananas produced in the plantation are shipped off, for consumers in foreign countries to enjoy and major fruit canning industries, the people of Kamukhaan are left to pay the price.

Kamukhaan was not the wasteland that it is now. As village elders wistfully recall, it was once the picture of perfect prime: a place so rich in natural resources people never went hungry. Trees and vegetation were
abundant, and the seas were loaded with marine life. The villagers who either fished or grew crops for a living always had more than enough to feed their families and sustain quite a comfortable lifestyle. The land where the banana plantation now stands originally belonged to the descendants of the Buloy family, part of the Manobo tribe, who rented the property to the Americans during the American Occupation. Diego Buloy, 71, the only living member of the Buloy family says that: “They promised to raise cattle in it. They cheated us and we had never been able to recover it.”

The vast acreage is currently being used by the LADECO company for the running of a banana plantation, which from the beginning promised prosperity, a “banana dreamland” that would change the lives of the people. Now, virtually no trace of that past life remains to be seen. All that is left is barren land, a contaminated sea, and 700 sick and impoverished people breathing in poisoned air.

Since the plantation’s expansion in the early 1980’s, the people of Kamukhaan have had to endure aerial spraying of pesticides which takes place as often as two to three times a month. Pesticides, which the company uses to ensure for themselves pest-free, export quality bananas, are sprayed by an airplane, which sweeps through the plantation and their entire village. Every time spraying occurs, the villagers smell strong and odorous fumes, from which there is no escape, even in the shelter of their own homes. Their eyes sting painfully and their skins itch. Most of them experience feelings of suffocation, weakness and nausea. Alona Tabarlong, 31, elaborates, “Children playing in the street come in, coughing and complaining that their eyes hurt. The airplane passes our streets, and even when it’s far away, the smell of pesticides still reaches inside our homes.” Another villager claims that during aerial spraying, he is sometimes sprinkled with pesticides, and itchy and painful skin lesions promptly appear.

Children and adults alike, who rarely became sick before the plantation came, are now vulnerable to disease. Skin diseases, abnormalities and various types of illnesses
are rampant among the villagers. They easily catch fever and constantly encounter spells of weakness and dizziness, vomiting and cough. Many claim to experience all sorts of body aches—stomachaches, backaches and headaches—which are aggravated during the periods of aerial spraying. Several people also suffer various ailments such as asthma, thyroid cancer, goiter, diorrhea and anemia. As Edgar Rodriguez, 31, narrates: “My skin has these white spots. Sometimes I have difficulty breathing. I am often attacked by severe cough and at times I can’t sleep because of it”. Linda Manggaga, a woman in her mid-forties, has a large lump on her neck that she claimed had been growing for a long time now. She believes that her weariness, and the growth on her neck had been the effects of pesticide exposure. “Around 1981”, she recalls, “I was on my way to sell wood when I smelt strong fumes and fell very ill. Then years later, I discovered this huge lump on my throat”.

Infants are often born sick, and with abnormalities ranging from cleft lip and palate to badly disfigured bodies. Several children are born with severe skin abnormalities. Infants dying at birth or shortly after are not rare. When Rebecca Dolka, 36, bore her child, it was lifeless, its body and eyes yellow in color. “I didn’t expect that the pesticides I inhaled would affect my pregnancy”, she said. Consistent exposure to pesticides have also proven to be an impediment in children’s mental and physical development. Children are often behind in their studies, and are often absent in class due to sicknesses.

An example is Lilibeth Hitalia, an 8 year old child who is constantly rushed to the hospital because of diarrhea. “She was already 4 years old when she started to speak. She has great difficulty in understanding things, and also was born too small”, her mother relates.

A number of adults have also been diagnosed with more serious, terminal diseases such as cancer. Many more have died of various contracted diseases. A village officer, Leonardo Tigaw, testified that in one month alone 5 people died because of diorrhea and fever. Michael Bakiran, 31, said that his mother constantly complained of the pesticide fumes and suspected that she died precisely because of this. “Her stomach became enlarged, and she became weak. The hospital diagnosed it as a ‘complicated disease’ and she died 2 weeks after.” Nanette Rodriguez, 37, narrates, “Several people have already died and many became sick, so we appealed to the manager of the plantation. But he said that they refused to pay the hospital bills if the illnesses are caused by our water and not by the pesticides, even when hospital doctors say that our water supply is contaminated by the pesticides that seep into our soil. That’s also the reason why so many people get sick, and spend so much. Others don’t even reach the hospital alive.” Apparently, constant deaths caused by diseases, ranging
from the simple to complicated, have horrifyingly plagued the people for years. “Just recently” another villager testifies, “a woman lost two of her children.”

Moreover, growth of plant life in the village has also been seriously stunted. When exposure to pesticides started, the coconut trees suddenly stopped bearing fruit so the villagers were left with no other choice but to cut them down. “The chemicals the plantation uses might be good for their banana crops, but on our coconut trees, it is destructive”, says Nanette Rodriguez, a villager. Their soil, too, had become infertile, so growing crops for food and income has now become very difficult. Planting food was suddenly not an option they could afford anymore. Even grass grew scantily among the place. Raising pigs, chickens and other animals also proved very difficult because increasing numbers of them would die every time spraying occurred. Animals that wandered into the plantation or fed on the grass near their property also met their death. The villagers also believe that their streams have been contaminated as well, because many animals refuse to drink from it and the animals that do consume the water eventually die.

Aside from the aerial spraying, the plantation also ground-sprays their banana crops using chemicals such as Furadan and Nemacur, both of which have been labeled as “extremely hazardous”. The village people believe that their underground water supply, which lies 180 feet deep, has long since been contaminated with pesticides. During the rainy season, rains wash over the plantation’s land and the pesticide-riddled water flows into the village where it rises up to as high as waist-level. As a result, the villagers who unavoidably wade in it, and the children who play in it, get ill.

An even worse predicament for the village is the fact that the river and the sea, both of which have been one of their major sources for food and income before, have not been spared from pesticide contamination. Their waters, which used to be teeming with fish, are now heavily polluted with chemicals. Fishermen recall a time 30 years ago, “when we used to garner up to 200 kilos of fish everyday. Now we are lucky if we can catch 2 kilos of it.” They have also observed the regular occurrence of fish kills, when before there used to be none. And due to extreme poverty people cannot avoid
eating the contaminated fish, and they end up getting sick as a result. Complaints have been repeatedly brought up to the plantation owners but the owners have refused to claim responsibility for the contamination of the sea and other water sources. The fishermen then tried to appeal to provincial authorities. They even took samples of the dead specimens, water, and soil to the town hall, but again their pleas merely fell on deaf ears and no definite action was taken.

With pesticides destroying the natural life from the land and water they were dependent on, the villagers who never went hungry before suddenly found themselves going to bed with empty stomachs. The “blondeness” among several of the children are tell-tale signs of malnutrition and protein deficiency.

When being farmers or fishermen alone made survival virtually impossible, most of the men in the community were forced to work as laborers in the plantation. They are usually employed as drainage workers and pesticide applicators, working in direct contact with the chemicals, wearing little or no protective clothing at all. One laborer narrates that his job involved walking through canals of waste materials, wherein the chemical-laced waters reached his thighs, thus rendering his boots useless. He consequently ended up losing two toes and ended up with a badly infected foot—the treatment for which he had to pay on his own. Another companion of his, who was doing similar work, was more unfortunate and eventually died of cancer of the foot.

Pesticide applicators inject pesticides to the bananas or directly spray it by backpack, some doing it as often as on a daily basis. Two laborers who had used GRAMOXONE (the trade name for paraquat) as spray were hospitalized, and one of them died. The other workers experience dizziness, weakness, and skin itching, and are absent from work almost once a week because of their illnesses. Edward Rama, who injects BAYCOR and DECIS every week to banana buds, said that he is “always feverish, experiences stomach aches, has skin that constantly itches, and tires easily.” Jose Antermo, 30, used FORMALIN daily, and he regularly experienced spells of weakness and dizziness. “FORMALIN is painful to the nose, and my chest tightens when I smell it. My wife, she lost our child when she was 4 months pregnant. I think it was because of my job. She washes my work clothes doused with FORMALIN.” Laborers who had served in the plantation for a long period of time...
gradually became too weak and sickly to continue, and had to stop working altogether. These workers are obviously involved in risky work, which affects their health. But they only receive a miniscule salary in return. The average employee who works in these extremely hazardous conditions, from morning until sundown, only earns about 45 pesos (US$1.1) a day. “Sometimes, we receive 90 pesos, if we finish a lot”, says one of them. This small amount of money the workers receive is well below the threshold income to be able to buy food that would sufficiently sustain their families. Oftentimes, these workers do not receive the medical treatment they badly need because they cannot afford to pay for it themselves. The plantation refuses to grant employees a raise in their salaries and could not be expected to pay for their hospital bills. One employee reported that he does not even get paid his salary, but is given food instead. He claimed that he was promised 9 pesos per cubic meter. And for the 6 cubic meters he manages to dig per day: “I should be given 54 pesos a day but instead I get 5 kilos of rice every week that is supposed to be enough to feed my family of four.” He has tried to complain about this unfair arrangement but according to him “the labour contractor is never around”. Some people, desperate for a living even sell ipil-ipil leaves (an ingredient for animal feed) for 2 pesos per kilo and earn the measly sum of 100 pesos a week.
With their health fast deteriorating, their food supply seriously depleted, their land destroyed and with no other source of income sufficient enough, the people of Kamukhaan may not be too far away from extinction, unless they find an effective antidote to their poisoned lives.

The plantation is nonchalant when confronted with complaints about their unsafe pesticide operations, and the local authorities likewise proved to be of no help to them. A village elder says with resignation, “We’ve tried, but as much as we want to, we cannot do anything about it anymore. It is very powerful people we are up against.”

Would man go as far as to slowly and painstakingly destroy more than 700 lives in the name of profit? Apparently, yes. In a land reeking with disease, coupled with poverty, the survival of the people of Kamukhaan barely hangs by a thread. By relating their observations and what they have endured through the years, they are literally crying out for help. Too deeply mired in their state of sickness, poverty and hopelessness, perhaps it is the only thing that they can do.

But we can help by supporting communities who are struggling to lift themselves up from places that profit-hungry corporations have relegated them, to once more give them a glimpse of the life that they once had and deserve. It is in far-flung villages like Kamukhaan where the picture of globalization and human greed is most clearly depicted.

The survivors of this community have presented their plight, which clearly reveals the grave impact pesticides use has on people’s lives. How it has caused the degeneration of Kamukhaan from a near natural paradise into ‘a living hell’. The damage can only be undone with the aid of people who value the intrinsic worth of human life over any amount of money or profit.

Perhaps by working hand in hand with the people of Kamukhaan to rebuild their homes and lives, we may be one in our hope in making this world a much safer place for ourselves, for our children, and for the future. But as long as villages like Kamukhaan exist, the battle against injustice, human greed and oppression will and must continue.

For further information on the Kamukhaan Community and How you can help contact:

Dr. Romeo F. Quijano, President, PAN Philippines, Lot 2, Block 30, Salome Tan street, BF Executive Village, Las Pinas, Metro Manila, Philippines. Tel/Fax: 63-2-5218251 E-mail: romyquij@yahoo.com
The Pesticide Action Network (PAN) is an international coalition of citizen’s groups and individuals who oppose the misuse and overuse of pesticides, and support the reliance on safe and sustainable alternatives. Established in 1982, the PAN international network presently links over 300 groups in 50 countries, and is coordinated through five regional coordinating centers. PAN is a network and no individual can direct or represent the entire coalition. Participants are free to pursue their own projects to further PAN’s objectives, and benefit from their access to the collective resources of the network.

PAN Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP) is based in Penang, Malaysia. We are linked to more than 150 groups, in 18 countries in the Asia Pacific region.

The Vision Statement of PAN Asia and the Pacific, as adopted at the 1996 and 2000 Steering Council Meetings, states:

“WE believe in people-centered, pro-women, development through sustainable agriculture;

WE are committed to protect the safety and health of people and the environment from pesticide use, and genetic engineering in food and agriculture;

WE will achieve these goals by empowering people within effective networks at the Asia Pacific and global levels.”

PAN AP prescribes to the following development principles: a participatory holistic approach; a commitment to gender equity and genuine partnership; the need to confront social injustice and global inequities; the value of biodiversity, appropriate traditional and indigenous knowledge systems; and the recognition that our earth is one interdependent living system.