

SOUTH CENTRAL LUZON BISHOPS CONFERENCE | IGLESIA FILIPINA INDEPENDIENTE

## RAMENTO PROJECT FOR RIGHTS DEFENDERS

JULY 2020

# Fulfilling God's work AMID A PANDEMIC

By Rev. Gina Grande

**THE COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world in a matter of days, causing great confusion, fear and anxiety across communities.**

Suddenly, here was a novel threat to our lives, as if the only way to be safe was to remain where we are, and simply not move or talk. I witnessed people choosing to stay put and keep quiet out of dread. Watching how numbers rose dramatically, I felt like I, too, had to keep myself under house arrest.

But, I also saw how poor people have been beaten down even more, how many lost their jobs as the economy plunged. My heart broke for the millions affected by the pandemic. I asked myself whether it was right to stay frozen in fear – while suffering, disorder and confusion descended upon the nation. As true followers of Christ, we need to serve others. We need to move so that those badly in need can feel that Jesus is moving in their lives, in the middle of the darkness.

Even as COVID-19 unraveled, people with golden hearts still worked to mount humanitarian missions. They sought donors and sponsors; and ensured that help would go to those who were badly hit by the pandemic. I, for one, volunteered in different responses organized by the Ramento Project for Rights Defenders (RPRD), Central Luzon Ecumenical Assembly (PACLEA) and other groups. We focused on delivering aid to Aytas and peasants in Pampanga, Bataan and Zambales.

I will impart three unforgettable experiences from our relief efforts that reflect how trial-fraught our well-meaning journeys have become but also how rewarding doing mission can be.

First, in an outreach operation in Bagac, Bataan, between RPRD and Umahon para sa Repormang Agraryo (Umahon), I had a troubling experience at a checkpoint. They blocked our vehicle, took our IDs, photographed us and then made us wait for a long time. In the end, the state forces went to our target community of some 339 Ayta and farmer families to hand out the relief packs themselves – for the cameras. They had said they wanted to join so the group would be safe, but I knew for sure they thought we were affiliated with the rebel New People's Army and our help would go to them. We had no agenda other than to help.

In Floridablanca, Pampanga, organizations Paruogan, Umahon and People for

Accountable Governance and Sustainable Action (Pag-asa) handed over much-needed relief packs to 200 families. I saw firsthand how happy the beneficiaries were to have received the support. A few days after the operation, however, the pastor I was with received a call from the community. Soldiers showed up at the house of the village chieftain, telling him that all those who had participated in the activity from our end needed to report voluntarily to the authorities or we would be forcibly taken. The joy suddenly became worry. This concern of ours is not finished yet.

With the same organizations, I headed for a very remote location in San Marcelino, Zambales. It was a tiring route. We were scheduled to provide relief to Ayta families in three areas – 220 in Sitio Lumibao, 50 in Sitio Naban and 50 in Sitio Bayarongan, all in Barangay Buhawen – within a day. We walked under the scorching heat of the sun. My skin burned and head hurt. I was on the verge of giving up but, while my body was about to give out, my spirit was fervent. After we'd given the food packs, I sat in one corner and caught a glimpse of the people's joy. Seeing the radiant smiles from the Ayta as they carried the blessings back home, all the exhaustion just went away.

These days, on top of the physical burnout, there is a lingering worry that I could get COVID-19 and pass it on even if I follow all the precautionary measures. At one point, one person had avoided me because they were afraid that I was a carrier given all the places I'd gone – a perfectly understandable but sad thing. God has always paid the hard work with joy and more inspiration to do good works so, through everything, I had kept forging on.

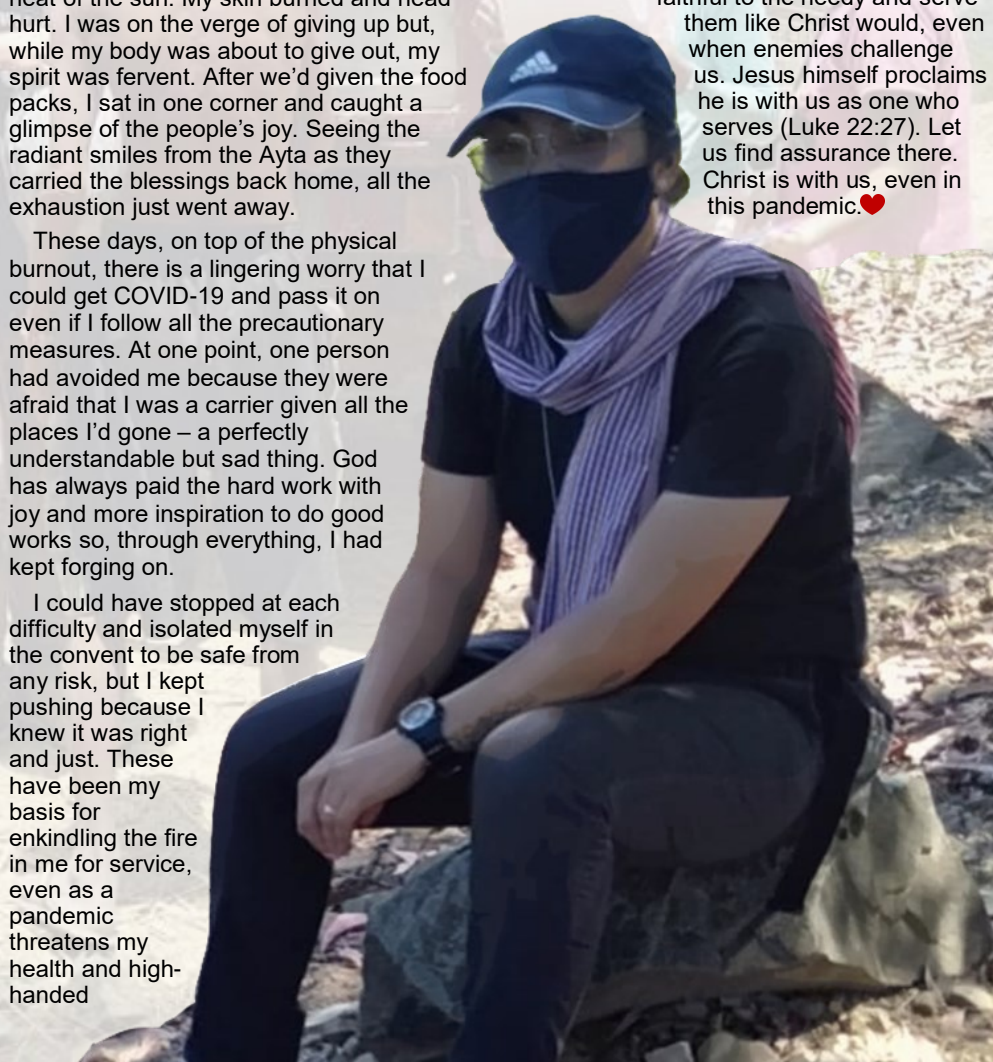
I could have stopped at each difficulty and isolated myself in the convent to be safe from any risk, but I kept pushing because I knew it was right and just. These have been my basis for enkindling the fire in me for service, even as a pandemic threatens my health and high-handed

authorities threaten my security. These times challenge us to "... [s]peak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute... [s]peak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9). Even if the task at hand is tough, we must persist because Christ expects us to do what is right and just. In my involvement with humanitarian work during the pandemic and even beyond it, I have never been immune to fear or fatigue. However, I would be disappointed in myself if I did not choose to go out and be faithful to Christ.

Wherever I go, I cling to the faith that God is with me.

May the passions of the hungry, abused, grieving and jobless during the pandemic fuel us, even as fear causes our fire to flicker. May we proclaim Christ's love to them, let Christ be known to them through our works of service. Let us be faithful to the needy and serve them like Christ would, even when enemies challenge us. Jesus himself proclaims he is with us as one who serves (Luke 22:27). Let us find assurance there. Christ is with us, even in this pandemic.♥

### DEFENDER'S JOURNAL



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**RAMENTO PROJECT FOR RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

## As COVID-19 wreaks havoc, RAMENTO PROJECT joins relief missions

IN A MATTER of days in early March, the country confirmed the first local transmission of COVID-19; the President declared a public health emergency; and parts of the country, including the whole of Luzon, went under lockdown.

Just as the protocols limited movement, many Filipinos suffered difficulties in moving from home to work, and thus had to stop going. Sweeping closures of business establishments also resulted in mass layoffs and an economic downturn that will impact the job market for possibly years. Communities that had chronically suffered poverty and neglect were pushed down even harder.

Many critics have been pointing out the lack of urgency in government response, with much-needed relief and other forms of assistance trapped in politics, corruption and bureaucracy.

With need and exasperation building up, the Ramento Project for Rights Defenders began joining relief efforts across Central Luzon and Southern Tagalog organized by community organizations and religious ministries, among others. The COVID-19 operations began as early as March 26, continuing efforts begun with the survivors of the Taal eruption.

Here are key facts about the efforts from March to May:

**3,151** families assisted  
**20+** communities reached

#### Focus sectors

- Aetas
- Mangyans
- Urban poor
- Stranded individuals
- Homeless individuals
- Peasants
- Fisherfolk

#### Key services

- Food packs
- Medicine
- Hot meals
- Hygiene kits
- Information campaigns

#### IFI partners

- IFI Diakonia Task Force on COVID-19
- IFI Tarlac Aeta Ministry
- Kapit-Bisig Humanitarian Mission
- Mission to the Mangyan
- National Priest Organization SCL
- SCL Bishops Conference

#### Ecumenical partners

- Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines
- Kalipunan ng Kristiyanong Kabataan sa Pilipinas
- National Council of Churches in the Philippines
- Pangasinan and Central Luzon Ecumenical Assembly
- Paruogan Ayta at Simbahan
- Peasant-Church People Movement-Cavite
- Rainbow Praise Church
- Roman Catholic Church
- United Church of Christ in the Philippines

#### Civil society partners

- 2KK Tulong sa Kapwa Kapatid Foundation
- Central Luzon Disaster Response Network
- CURE COVID
- Gabriela Bignay
- Lingap Gabriela
- Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas-Bacoor
- People for Accountable Governance and Sustainable Action
- Project Pamammita-Lakbay Katutubo
- Task Force Children of the Storm
- Umahon para sa Repormang Agraryo♥





# POLITICIZING COVID-19 AID

HUMANITARIAN circles believe relief assistance must get to the destitute as urgently as possible, spared of all the bottlenecks and politicking. The needs of disaster-stricken people must be paramount. Basic necessities should also outweigh creed, affiliation or any other distinction.

Heeding calls from various vulnerable communities, faith-based groups and individuals launched humanitarian missions, joining a bigger surge of concerned citizens. For its part, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI) paid special focus on historically disadvantaged groups whose difficulties were protracted by the COVID-19 lockdowns. Even with the cleanest intentions, however, workers from the Church faced challenges emanating from state policies and forces. Staff members and stakeholders at the Ramento Project for Rights Defenders (RPRD) were not spared.

“*Pari ka ng IFI?*” asked a policeman to Rev. Gina Grande, an RPRD accompaniment officer, at a checkpoint in Bagac, Bataan.

“I felt a genuine fear when they asked me. I was even asked repeatedly,” she recalled. “I was very nervous. I tried to look calm because I thought they wouldn’t let us pass if they saw me trembling.”

It was May 17, 2020. She joined a relief mission targeting Ayta families in Pampanga, Bataan and Zambales provinces. Just before then, they had waited two hours at a checkpoint to enter Bataan. They were surprised to find police waiting for them in Bagac, standing next to the Ayta leaders set to fetch the relief packs for their community. It was impossible for Rev. Grande’s team to pass through checkpoints beyond that point.

In the end, the police joined the community leaders, Rev. Grande said. “They suspected the relief packs would go to the New People’s Army (NPA). They wanted to be sure.”

That mission emphasized for her a recurring problem for humanitarian work: varying – and confusing – degrees of strictness among checkpoints.

“Some on-duty officers are very lenient while some are overly strict... Especially in Bataan, they were very stringent, inspecting all the relief packs going in,” she said. She had also encountered the same treatment before, in a mission on April 4 going to Ayta in Sitio Binasak, Mabiga, Hermosa town. “We were unable to deliver the aid to them directly so we had to hand them over to their leaders at the town’s boundary.”

“I think it’s because of their suspicion,” she explained the rigor at the checkpoints. “For churches, specifically, when they see that the

effort is from IFI or the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), they look at us differently.” Both churches had recently been red-tagged by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, the government agency that has frequently drawn flak for indiscriminately branding civil society organizations as communist allies or members.

The same mistrust spills over to the communities helped by IFI, UCCP and other red-tagged groups. A few days after a mission to Ayta in Sitio Tirya, Mawacat in Floridablanca, Pampanga, Rev. Grande and her group were recalled to the community to clarify with authorities why they went there. The chieftain and those who coordinated the effort had been red-tagged. The priest and company are currently arranging a return as the community leaders are reportedly harassed persistently.

## Study situation

“We can also attest to the red-tagging, but we study the situation on the ground before we go in so we can move vigilantly,” said Bishop Ronelio Fabrique, referring to the humanitarian work of the IFI Diocese of Romblon and Mindoro to the Mangyans in parts of Oriental Mindoro. IFI has a longstanding program there, the Mission to the Mangyans. The indigenous people of Mindoro island have been a special focus of the diocesan COVID-19 response, Task Force Diakonia.

Risky encounters were averted because the target communities provided timely updates to them, he said. “There were times when they told us to postpone our efforts because of hazards. It is important to be aware of the situation. Mindoro is a hotspot not only in upper levels but on the ground.”

For other workers reaching out to the Mangyans, such as Rev. Glofie Balintong of the United Methodist Church (UMC), military presence had caused some concerns for both UMC and UCCP. During National Council of Churches in the Philippines’ (NCCP) “Aid under attack” webinar on July 7, she cited communities completely abandoned by Mangyans because of military presence, leaders threatened with violence, and relief volunteers facing intensive questioning because of alleged support for the NPA.

“Right now, in our office in Danggay (Roxas), there are 30 members of the 23rd Brigade of the Philippine Army,” she said. “This is because of our efforts to provide relief assistance...”

Bishop Fabrique, also the board chair of RPRD, added that the COVID-19 lockdowns added difficulty to accessing already remote areas, such as Mangyan communities in Mansalay and Bulalacao towns. “Each town has a checkpoint. Our workers find it harder to move around... These measures are necessary, but some are too strict.”

## Credit-grabbing

Tarlac-based RPRD accompaniment officer Rev. Gilbert Garcia went to the IFI mission in Villa Aglipay, San Jose town, with Tarlac Bishop Dindo Ranojo and several others on June 16. They were about to hand over relief packs to peasant residents there, a project involving the diocese, RPRD, the Pangasinan and Central Luzon Ecumenical Assembly (PACLEA) and NCCP.

“Private cars arrived containing police, four of whom approached to explain their purpose for coming,” he recalled. “They brought vitamins and peanut butter, which they wanted to distribute... They took photos of the list of



recipients, the distribution itself, the tarp and the organizers. They took note of the contents of the packs and the leaflets we gave out, which contained information on COVID-19.”

Immediately after the distribution, a barangay *kagawad* went to them, said Rev. Garcia. “The barangay captain had sent her after the Philippine National Police (PNP) in San Jose claimed that the operation benefitted NPA members and had no proper clearances.”

The group denied the allegations, clarifying to the emissary that the recipients were not NPA and that the organizers of the event informed the barangay days prior.

On June 24, the municipal police station posted on Facebook that they “cosponsored” the program. Rev. Garcia denied this: “Never did we enter a partnership with PNP in our programs and projects. This is a way by which the PNP surveils IFI and NCCP after having red-tagged religious groups as ‘NPA supporters’ or ‘communist-terrorist.’”

Bishop Ranojo, also the chairperson of PACLEA, is coordinating with the provincial government and PNP for a dialogue on the issue. During “Aid under attack,” he also denied any partnership with PNP on the effort.

On the webinar, he also noted the unnecessary strictness of personnel from the PNP, Armed Forces of the Philippines and Bureau of Fire Protection in maintaining checkpoints and overlooking movement around Hacienda Luisita. They reportedly did not allow on-site relief efforts for impoverished peasants. They also attempted to make a retired pastor involved with the humanitarian efforts there sign a document claiming he was an “NPA surrenderee.”

## Beats martial law

“We are humanitarian people,” said Bishop Ranojo. “What we are experiencing right now beats the martial law years because they want to see everything – who we are giving to, from whom, how, what are given. This affects the security of our workers, even the people we give to and those who facilitate the efforts, as we know from the events in Pampanga.”

On Labor Day 2020, RPRD accompaniment officer Rev. Mary Grace Masegman received news that 10 volunteers at a Task Force Children of the Storm (TFCOS) feeding program in Marikina were arrested. A few times before then, RPRD supported the organization’s relief efforts, and she herself distributed goods. She reckoned that she could very well have been invited to join that effort if she hadn’t conducted her own feeding program at the IFI Santo Niño Parish, also in Marikina.

Rev. Masegman said the cops may have misconstrued the TFCOS effort because of the signages, which were not unusual materials for

the group: “They had placards bearing calls during the feeding program. Placards also hung from the vehicles they used to get the food to the community.”

That day, some 76 activists and volunteers were arrested nationwide. A day later, the so-called Marikina 10 were released after the fiscal found no basis to charge them.

## Disservice to people

“These relief efforts should not be stopped with malicious attacks or bureaucratic delays,” said Rev. Wilfredo Ruazol, RPRD training and education officer. “These are goods that help those heavily affected by disasters to reclaim their dignity by receiving food, medications, clothing and other forms of assistance. If you toy with these items, unreasonably delay them or cast aspersions on them, you are doing a disservice to those people.”

He also hit the credit-grabbing: “It is just distasteful that authorities would go to communities and pass off the effort as their own. These are well-meaning donations packed with care by staff and volunteers. People work with us because they trust we would get the help to the communities in need. Claiming you are cosponsoring efforts or taking full credit for them, distributing goods to civilians armed with guns, these are unethical.”

Rev. Ruazol said it was important for humanitarian workers to insist that assistance should get to communities sanitized from corruption and partisanship, to fight that the government eliminate the unnecessary delays and challenges to well-intentioned efforts, and to advocate solutions to longtime inequities and current voids that make communities even more vulnerable during this pandemic.

“As people of faith, we are expected to respond compassionately to the challenge of service, amid the violence and fear,” said Rev. Masegman, in solidarity with RPRD staff members and partners who had experienced politicization in relief efforts. “Despite the threats and dangers, may we continue to stand up for righteousness and truth. May love and faith continue to inspire us to give hope and let justice flow. Remember that a Christian who truly serves God serves others.”

Bishop Fabrique said: “It is difficult to do the right thing amid violent times, but the challenge of following Christ is ever more relevant. We must be like Christ who endured hardships and overcame the world.”

“To all church people who experience persecution in fulfilling your duty,” he concluded, “do not be discouraged and, instead, shine brighter for the mission of God. Study and reflect on the context where you work so you may fulfill your mandate well. No one can stop the mission of God.”❤️



# RPRD goes online

OVER the course of the lockdowns, it became evident to the Ramento Project for Rights Defenders (RPRD) that a “new normal” beckoned, where many things would best be done online, at least while the world awaited a cure for COVID-19. With this realization, it migrated some learning sessions and dialogues to the internet.

RPRD began on June 7 with “Rights-based approach, what?” It gathered some 30 members of the Youth of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (YIFI). It followed up with a July 22 event with the National Priests Organization and the South Central Luzon Bishops Conference. Gathering nearly 100 IFI faithful and ecumenical partners, the webinar discussed: “The Impact of the Anti-Terrorism Law on Human Rights, Civil Liberties and Democracy.”

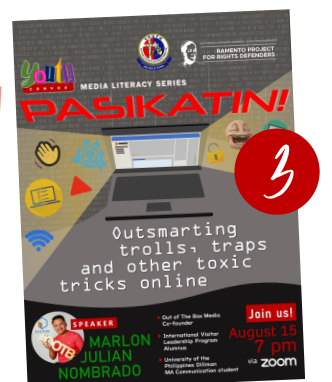
It partners with YIFI on August 15 in a discussion that tackles data rights, a contemporary human rights concern.



The law is a pointless response to the real issues, such as lack of health facilities/workers, massive unemployment, poverty, maleducation.

The response of the tyrannical government is to riddle Filipinos with bullets instead of giving them food on their table; to handcuff them with steel chains instead of providing them jobs to address their daily needs. As mentioned in the opening remarks, the Anti-Terror Law will indeed prevent Filipinos from liberating their fellowmen from dehumanization. In addition, the said act will have a huge effect on the prophetic mission of the Church. This should be opposed in the strongest terms possible.

**BRO. JOHN PAUL CHRISTOPHER PABLO**  
Aglipay Central Theological Seminary



Join RPRD and YIFI on August 15 at 7 pm via Zoom or Facebook Live on “Kabataang Aglipayano.”❤️