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LAND REFORM

New life throbbing in rural areas

A group of farmers, sitting around a shade tree, listen intently to a young man explaining the mechanics of a cooperative. Another group, in an adjacent community, are digging the last few meters of a canal that will provide enough water for their crops during the summer months. Far removed from them, at the foot of a hill, a lone figure stands atop a rice paddy, surveying, almost reverentially, a plot of land his family had been tenantry for decades but which they now can call their own.

These are some of the typical scenes that are likely to greet the visitor going around the Philippine countryside today. They illustrate the new vigor that now animates life in the rural areas, seven months after the President decreed that the nation's 700,000 or so farmers would henceforth own the lands they till, thereby assuring them of bigger returns from their farms and freeing them from centuries of exploitation.

It does not sound as easy as that, of course. The various aspects of implementation are constantly being reviewed and improved upon, but the results attained thus far indicate there is no turning back in the land reform program in the Philippines.

"Land reform is the first reform we have started under the new society and, therefore, it is my resolve that it is irreversible," the President said after handing out the first land transfer certificates to the first batch consisting of 431 awardees last December.

That figure has since increased several times over. As of April 7, a total of 12,000 farmers had received such certificates. The pace is being quickened, what with thousands of government workers now fielded all over the country. Some are directly involved in "Operation Land Transfer," the first major activity in the program. Others are indirectly but just as actively involved, such as in the organization of cooperatives, which will assure the farmer greater access to production and marketing facilities, instead of leaving him to the mercy of the landlord, the middleman, and the usurer as what happened in the past and which, ultimately, kept him in unending bondage to the soil.

This week, the President adopted two additional measures that would further hasten the pace of the program and firm up the gains already achieved.

First, he set up the Land Reform



President Marcos signing cooperative decree, old farmer receiving land transfer certificate: testimonials to tenants' emancipation from age-old bondage.

Council, with himself at the helm, to resolve, promptly and decisively, whatever problems remain in the implementation phase.

Second, he promulgated a decree strengthening the cooperative movement, which now occupies a focal point in land reform. The premise is that the farmer must be given not just ownership of the land but also the necessary support and other incentives to enable him to get more from his farm and thus become a more productive participant in the overall development effort. Specifically, the decree grants cooperatives the same rights and privileges enjoyed by business firms, including the setting up of enterprises and rural banks. The long-range goal is to increase the income and purchasing power of low-income Filipinos, who make up the membership of cooperatives, and thus help bring about an equitable distribution of the country's wealth.

The implementation stage, programmed for completion in three years, will result in the redistribution of 1.3 million hectares of agricultural (rice and corn) lands. The cumulative targets are: 550,000 hectares in 1973; 1,150,000, hectares in 1974; and 1,300,000 hectares in 1975. By contrast, it is estimated that, under previous land-distribution schemes, it would have taken at least 200 years to achieve the same objective.

The entire program will cost more than P5.4 billion, involving land value, transfer of titles, cooperative development, agricultural credit, and infrastructure development.

Under Presidential Decree 27, now popularly known as the Tenant Emancipation Decree, each tenant is entitled to own five hectares of land if the land is irrigated or three hectares if non-irrigated. With the utilization of

improved farming methods, this area is expected sufficient to support an average family of five members. The landowner, for his part, can retain not more than seven hectares of his land if he intends to cultivate it or is now cultivating it. An old reform law (passed in 1963) allowed the owner to retain as much as 75 hectares; an amendatory act lowered it to 24.

In adopting the new and far-reaching land reform policy for the country, the President has assured that justice will be given everyone. Thus, the landowner will be given just payment for his land, equivalent to two-and-a-half times the average production for three normal crop years and to be amortized by the tenant for 15 years at a reasonable interest rate of 6 percent per annum.

To all intents and purposes, however, the tenant, even before the end of the amortization period, is now "deemed owner" of the land he tills. Thus, the landowner cannot eject him without risking stiff penalties for such act.

At the start of the implementation late last year, nine towns in six provinces were designated pilot areas for "Operation Land Transfer." These are San Mateo, Isabela; Guimba and Zaragoza in Nueva Ecija; Plaridel Bulacan; Calamba and Binan in Laguna; Tigaon, Camarines Sur; and Pototan and Dingle in Iloilo. The lessons gained in these pilot areas are proving valuable to land transfer operations in other parts of the country.

First targets in the land transfer are landholdings of 100 hectares and above. The next are landholdings of 50 hectares and above but not over 100. The last are landholdings of less than 50. So far, the Department of Agrarian Reform, together with the Bureau of Lands, has mapped out

206,841.37 hectares owned by 683 big landowners in 34 provinces.

Alongside "Operation Land Transfer," government men are now busy organizing cooperatives to help the new breed of landowners. The targets are 4,335 barrio and 290 area cooperatives. A barrio cooperative will have a membership of 150 farmers. An area cooperative will be made up of 15 barrio cooperatives. So far, 22 cooperatives (involving 330 barrio chapters) have been formed. Other government workers are in the field to teach farmers modern methods of agriculture.

Now serving as "frontline" men in various aspects of the program are some 3,000 officials and employees of the Department of Agrarian Reform (only 359 were left to man the central office in Manila); 1,900 fieldmen trained by the Department of Local Government and Community Government to organize cooperatives; 9,000 field technicians from the Bureau of Agricultural Extension and Bureau of Plant Industry doing extension work for farmers; and thousands of personnel from other government agencies.

Now that land reform is in full swing, the President is optimistic that a firm foundation for a new and truly dynamic society will be realized.

"Land reform must be the basis and the fundamental foundation of all our efforts," the President said.

For the Filipino farmer, it will mean a lot of things, and not the least of these is an end to centuries of exploitation and misery. As one observer of the present Philippine scene has said: "The (day) of emancipation has come. The travails of the farmer will soon be over. Freedom and land ownership, the cornerstone of change in the New Society, are worth all the 400 years of waiting."