

DESPITE 'RED-TAGGING,' COMMUNITY PANTRIES HIT 350

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AFTER THE SCARE A Quezon City Hall employee reminds people to observe social distancing at the Maginhawa Community Pantry on Wednesday, a day after it stopped free food distribution due to security concerns when it was Red-tagged by the government's anticommunist task force and its supporters. Organizers received assurance from both local and national government officials that they were free to continue giving humanitarian aid to the poor.



The Maginhawa Community Pantry in Quezon City on Wednesday resumed its distribution of free food to the poor a day after it halted operations due to concerns for the safety of its volunteers following a Red-tagging scare.

To the original food aid station's small bamboo cart was added a second "kariton" containing fresh produce. Both are parked on Maginhawa, a street in Teachers Village lined with restaurants and cafes that were doing brisk business before the pandemic struck and are now struggling to stay afloat. Just a week after it was set up on this busy street, other community pantries had been put up in hundreds of localities, inspired by the tenet of "Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan, kumuha batay sa pangangailangan" (Give whatever you can, take only what you need).

Ana Patricia Non, a 26-year-old small business owner who started the community effort, said there were now around 350 community pantries nationwide where people unable to earn a living during the pandemic were free to pick up rice, dried fish, noodles, fresh vegetables, canned goods or whatever was available to bring home to their families.

These food aid stations could be found as far north as Aparri in Cagayan province and Lagawe in Ifugao and as far south as Zamboanga City and Davao City. Others were established in El Nido, Palawan, and on Boracay Island.

Mayor Joy Belmonte of Quezon City said there were around 70 in her sprawling city. In Pasig City, Mayor Vico Sotto said there were 30.

Police visit

The Maginhawa Community Pantry, which provides food to some 1,000 individuals daily, immediately drew the attention not just of the public but also of the security authorities.

On Monday, several police officers arrived at the site to get Non's telephone number and to ask about her political affiliations.

The Facebook pages of the Quezon City Police District and the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-Elcac) then shared content linking the community pantries to communist rebels.

Concerned over the police profiling and the Red-tagging, Non decided to suspend the food distribution until she was assured of the safety of their volunteers, donors and the people lining up to get aid.

"Red-tagging is no joke, especially during these times," she said in an interview with ANC on Wednesday. "We could not let it slide, especially because the people here are innocent."

Critics of the government say that the baseless labeling of certain individuals and groups as communist rebels or supporters have led to violent and even fatal attacks.

They say that organizers of community pantries are being harassed and intimidated because such efforts show that ordinary citizens had only themselves and not the government to rely on to survive the pandemic.

For 'future collaborations'

Philippine National Police chief Debold Sinas on Wednesday directed the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG) to investigate the

various field units reported to have been engaged in the alleged profiling activities.

Police Brig. Gen. Ronaldo Olay, the PNP spokesperson, said during Wednesday's Laging Handa briefing that some police unit heads had explained that the taking down of personal information of community pantry organizers was for possible "future collaborations" on police community relations activities.

Olay told the Inquirer in a phone interview that the PNP-CIDG would first determine which police units were involved.

"The PNP chief has been clear that he never gave any directive for profiling or 'Red-tagging' of community pantries," he said.

'A sin to be humane'

Detained Sen. Leila de Lima denounced the Red-tagging and harassment of community pantry organizers and rallied support for Non and the others.

She said President Duterte's government "is scared witless of the hope that these community efforts have sparked amid a pandemic, that it had to mobilize its police force to stop the continuing unmasking of its failures."

"Under Duterte, it's a sin to be humane. Even residents from poor communities like Aroma in Tondo have pooled their meager resources to put up a pantry; yet, they are accused of being part of communist propaganda initiated by the [New People's Army]?" she said in a statement from her Camp Crame cell.

She and Senators Franklin Drilon, Risa Hontiveros, Francis Pangilinan, Nancy Binay, Sherwin Gatchalian, Grace Poe and Ralph Recto said in a joint statement that the harassment and intimidation of those involved in the community pantries "exacerbate the hunger and hardships of Filipinos."

"Those who see red in these 'bayanihan' projects should have their hearts examined," Recto said in a separate statement.

"Community pantries need more food bags, not red tags, nor red tape," he said. "Let them bloom wherever they sprout, regardless of who planted them. Bureaucracy has no business throwing a shade over this pure expression of people's power."

Privacy protection

A data privacy expert said the National Privacy Commission (NPC) should take strong steps to stop the unlawful profiling of organizers of community pantries.

Under the Data Privacy Act (DPA), the privacy watchdog has the power to investigate violations of the law even without any formal complaints and can issue cease-and-desist orders, and even compel a government agency to abide by its order, said Jamael Jacob, executive director of LIGHTS Institute.

“If there are no consequences for these types of actions, then it shouldn’t be a surprise that government agencies will simply keep doing them, knowing they will always get away with it,” he added. He said in an email interview with the Inquirer that the PNP had no legal basis for profiling or claim exemption from coverage of the law.

“If the organizers of these community pantries are committing a crime, then why not just arrest them on the spot? Why the need to profile them first? Last time I checked, sharing one’s food and other basic necessities with other people is perfectly legal,” Jacob said.