

Philippines' Aeta people 'beggars' in their own land

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For the Pinatubo Aetas, one of the most unique ethnolinguistic peoples of the Philippines, the 1991 volcanic eruption that killed more than 600 people only made their plight worse

Philippine bush man Edward Serrano struck two rocks together and wrapped the faint spark in wood shavings, building a fire in much the same way Stone Age man must have done two million years ago.

The short, Afro-ed jungle survival instructor is an Aeta, from one of the most unique ethnolinguistic peoples of the Philippines, who are also the archipelago's first known inhabitants.

But after hunting and gathering for most of the past 40,000 years, their bushcraft is nearly forgotten, many of their languages are all but extinct, and their way of life is swiftly dying out.

Rapid urbanisation has turned tiny Aeta forest settlements into virtual islands, their nomadic lifestyle shut down as the deer, warthog and jungle fowl they hunt for food are extirpated.

"We can no longer do many of the things that our ancestors took for granted," said Serrano, a high-school dropout who teaches soldiers and police how to make fire without matches or lighters.

He teaches them where look for water, should they get lost in the jungle, and which leaves, fruits and seeds are safe to eat—skills learnt from his father.

Sapang Uwak, which means Crow Creek, his sun-baked village in the foothills of the Pinatubo volcano about two hours' drive from Manila, showcases both the old way of life—and the disruption of the new.

Languid water buffaloes pull carts filled with bananas and taro along dirt roads, parched river beds and forests that the community of 1,700 people claim as their ancestral domain.

But to leave their village to take their produce to market or find work as farmhands or construction workers, they have to pass through a giant private entertainment park.

'Aliens in our own land'

A 1997 law recognised the rights of some 15 million ethnic minorities to their ancestral lands, and Sapang Uwak and nearby Aeta settlements have filed claims on a combined 17,000 hectares (42,000 acres).

However, the government has yet to define the boundaries of many areas, fuelling fears of encroachment by private developers, said Roman King, leader of an association of Aeta communities.

"We were the first peoples of the Philippines, but now we are aliens in our own country," said King, a retired policeman from the nearby settlement of Inararo.

"If we lose our lands we have nowhere else to go... You'll see more of us begging in the streets," he said.



Edward Serrano is from one of the most unique ethnolinguistic peoples of the Philippines, who are also the archipelago's first known inhabitants

Most of the Philippines' estimated seven million Aetas live in tiny, isolated communities, engaged in slash-and-burn farming—clearing forests for fields—moving with the seasons and with limited contact with the outside world.

Aside from Sapang Uwak, three other Pinatubo Aeta communities have

won titles to 39,000 hectares, giving the families steady cash from land leased to quarries, golf courses, and tourist resorts.

But it is a cumbersome process and typically takes years to complete, said Jonathan Adaci, director of the ancestral domains office at the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples.

A mere 180 titles have been handed out nationwide, with some five million other claims still being processed, Adaci said.

By law ancestral domains cannot be bought nor sold, but this has not stopped outsiders from mysteriously obtaining titles.

"At times there are some powerful people in government involved," he told AFP, declining to give names.

Unscrupulous people talk uneducated Aetas into parting with their land inheritance for a pittance, said Cynthia Zayas, a University of the Philippines anthropologist.

"Private developers are eating up their land. The way it's turning out, they could become squatters in their own land," Zayas added.

The Aetas of Sapang Uwak are dismayed at the delays, but feel helpless, said survival instructor Serrano, a father of seven in his late 30s.

"We've been pushed out in the past. We do not want that to happen to us again," he told AFP.

'They never fight back'



Edward Serrano teaches soldiers and police how to make fire without matches or lighters

Philippine minorities have been progressively elbowed out since the late 16th century as first Spain and later the United States colonised the islands, introducing the concept of property titles, Zayas said.

"They never fight back... The Aeta will just run to the mountains. They're a passive people and they don't like violence," she added.

For the Pinatubo Aetas, the 1991 volcanic eruption that killed more than 600 people only made their plight worse.

Deprived of their farms as well as game to hunt, about 35,000 Aetas moved to shelters clustered close to the main towns, according to government data.

Many never left, with families reduced to begging on the roadsides.



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"They also started to adopt the values of the lowlanders, they buy junk food, eat all these processed food and acquire the illnesses of lowlanders like high blood pressure and diabetes," Zayas said.

Getting formal titles to their ancestral lands is not enough and Aetas must learn new skills by going to school, said Adaci of the ancestral domains office.

"If they embrace the mainstream they should have more stability, but that means they will no longer be able to roam," he added.



Rapid urbanisation has turned tiny Aeta forest settlements into virtual islands

Sapang Uwak children now go to school, but most are slow starters. Teachers often buy their pupils pencils and pads out of their own pockets, said first grade teacher Betsy Lozano.

"It's a difficult existence because their parents do not really have stable incomes," she told AFP.

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