

## Baseco and Its Proclamation

Denis Murphy

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## Baseco and Its Proclamation

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Baseco was an unremarkable urban poor community from its beginning in the 1970's up to 2001 and EDSA III. Then hundreds maybe thousands of its people joined the pro Estrada forces that rallied at the EDSA Shrine and marched on Malacañang. It was suddenly a suspect place and was seen and still is seen as a major recruiting locale for anti-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo groups. In February 2002 the land of Baseco was proclaimed by the president as a residential site for the people already living there, and shortly after 25%-30% of the community was destroyed by fire on Holy Saturday night, Sabado de Gloria. The government in an unparalleled burst of activity filled in the land where the houses were burned (it had been a community on stilts over mud and water) and gave certificates of award to 750 fire victim families all within one month. Thus most of the major events in the community's life have taken place in the last two years.

Baseco consists of Engineer's Island and two stone breakwaters that extend out from it into Manila Bay. One borders the Pasig River, the other protects shipping in the South Harbor. They form a giant "V" with the island at the base of the "V". Before 1980 there was water between the breakwaters and Engineer's Island and so they are called islands also—Isla Laki (the South Harbor breakwater) and Isla Liit (along the river). Now they are joined to Engineer's Island. Engineer's Island has an area of about 25-30 has. and is separated from the mainland by a narrow channel connecting the river and the South Harbor. The homes that have built up

along the two breakwaters, cover another 25-30 has. February 12, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo proclaimed 52 has. including the original island and the breakwater communities.

The island had been a ship loading and unloading site and ship repair yard for many years. It was once called the National Shipyard and Steel Corporation (NASSCO). In 1964 it was acquired by the Romualdez family, kin to Imelda Romualdez Marcos, and named BASECO, Bataan Shipping and Engineering Company.

In the 1960s and 1970s some families of workers in the shipyard lived on the island. Fishermen from Bataan put up leantos where they stopped to rest on their way to fishing grounds in Cavite. At the start of the 1980s when Baseco was declared a barangay (Barangay 649, Zone 68) there were still only 15-20 families in the area. In the 1980s hundreds of families moved in, especially after President Corazon Aquino came to power, residents say. The same happened in Parola across the river. That area had been cleared of urban poor families in the late 1970s by President Ferdinand Marcos to make room for facilities that would support the new international pier to be constructed there. After 1987 and Marcos' fall thousands of families reoccupied the area.

In Baseco the newly arrived families built their houses on low-lying on land that was a combination of river silt, rubble of old building dumped by the DPWH mud dredged from the South Harbor, garbage and the small white gasang-gasang shells. Most of the houses, are still on stilts over shallow water. At high tide the water comes almost up to the floors of the houses. Some families came directly from the provinces to join friends or relatives in Baseco, but most were either relocated to Baseco from other communities cleared of urban poor families in Metro Manila, or as in Parola were brought in by professional squatter syndicates. Reports say the syndicates they charged P1,000-5,000 per family. The people who arrived in Baseco were nearly all from other urban poor areas in Metro Manila.

Baseco is in the parish of San Agustin in Intramuros, the oldest and most famous of all Philippine churches, the site of historic church and government meetings in the past and now the setting for some of society's most lavish weddings. Looking South over the harbor people in Baseco can see the Philippine Plaza Hotel; looking North are Parola and Tondo; looking East toward the mainland people see the tall buildings downtown Manila; looking West across the Bay the people can see some of the most beautiful sunsets in the world.

The area at the base of the "V" which was Engineer's Island and not therefore under water is the most built up, and developed part of Baseco. Here are the schools, barangay hall, health center, shipping facilities and the concrete houses of the better off families. The families who live beside the two breakwaters that stretch into the bay are much poorer. They live on stilts over shallow water, packed close together like

driftwood piled up on the beach. The only access deep into the blocks is along the huge stones that form the breakwaters. Inside the two clusters of houses is a lagoon. City planning officer, Architect Diogracias Tablan says development of Baseco will begin by reclamation of the entire area between the breakwaters, including the area where the houses now stand and the lagoon. All families will therefore have to relocate at one time or another to a staging area in Baseco. The inhabited area along the South Harbor breakwater is called "Isla Laki and contain blocks 1-14"; the breakwater stretches west almost a kilometer. The area of the houses along the Pasig River breakwater is called "Isla Liit and contains blocks 15-17-A". It is not as long or as heavily populated as its neighbor. Joining the two arms of Baseco to the West is a beach of white sand called "La Playa" where some families live though their houses are knocked down whenever there is a typhoon or a very heavy rain.

A survey conducted in mid 2001 by an Urban Poor Associates' team led by Salome Quijano found there were 4,419 households in Baseco. A household can be one or more families and individuals and is defined simply as a group that has one budget and one arrangement for meals. The total number of nuclear families was 81%. A census tagging operation by the City of Manila in 2002 in connection with proclamation of the land found 6,060 families.

It is typical of many urban poor areas. Only 28% finished high school. Most people work as unskilled laborer (24%), vendors (16%), small business owners (10%), skilled workers (10%), drivers (10%), security people (6%). Most people own the house they live in (74%). Renters are 22% and sharers 4%. These are the figures found more or less in the National Government Center and other urban poor areas.

Average rent is P639. Average family income is P7, 398. Some 60% of the families are below the recently announced poverty line for Metro Manila of P6,800.

### **The Proclamation**

Several factors led to the land proclamation in Baseco on February 12, 2002.

In 2001 Baseco was identified by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Pasig River Rehabilitation Commission (PRRC) as a high priority area for urban renewal. Security of land tenure is a necessary condition for the Bank's urban renewal work, so it is logical the government would grant this through a proclamation. The nature of this ADB-PRRC program will be explained below.

Secondly, the government was aware since May 2001 of Baseco's political tendencies. It would be logical for the government to give the residents land to soften their allegiances to former President Joseph Estrada and win them toward President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Thirdly, from March 2001 on a people's organization called Kabalikat sa Pagpapaunlad ng Baseco (Kabalikat) was organized in Baseco which made land proclamation one of its goals. At a meeting June 25 in Malacañang Kabalikat members invited the president to visit their area and proclaim it. She visited them July 10. In their presence she called Mayor Lito Atienza by phone and asked if he had any problem with her proclaiming Baseco. No, he said. What else could he say. He soon saw how the development of Baseco could fit in with his own larger plans. For example, it could be a relocation area for families that needed to be moved from under bridges and other urban poor areas.

Fourthly, the proclamation is involved on government entities. The Philippine Ports Authority (PPA) managed the land for the Philippine Estates Authority (PEA). Once the mayor agreed, it was relatively easy to get the approval of PPA and PEA. Other areas, such as, Parola which have privately owned land and lease agreements are more complicated to work out.

### **Kabalikat and the Proclamation**

From the beginning the organization of Kabalikat was connected with the Pasig River Rehabilitation Project (PRRP) and the promise it brought of on-site urban renewal. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Philippine government signed an agreement in August 2000 for the PRRP, which aimed to improve the quality of water in the river, provide 10-meter wide Environment Protection Areas (EPAs) along the banks, and stimulate urban renewal up to 500 meters from the river.

The clearing of the EPAs led to the eviction and relocation of almost 5,000 urban poor families in 1998-2000. Another round of evictions to a number of 4,000-5,000 is planned. The EPAs are only found in areas where the urban poor have been evicted. The government has admitted it lacks the resources needed to expropriate the 10-meter easement area from private owners and corporations. Also historical sites, such as Malacañang, are excluded. NGOs and people's groups argue that the EPAs of ten-meters width have lost their *raison d'être* if they are not continuous along the whole stretch of the river.

The Pasig River Rehabilitation Commission (PRRC) and ADB have selected 30-37 areas (the number varies from report to report) along the river for urban renewal. Baseco has been assigned a high priority among them. The people's organization in Baseco, Kabalikat sa Pagpapaunlad ng Baseco (Kabalikat) has drawn up a people's plan for the urban renewal; it asks that all families living in Baseco be retained in the area on small lots with detached or row housing. If families have to move for the EPAs, or other infrastructure needs, they should be relocated to the lagoon that exists between the two islands, which hopefully will be reclaimed by then. The people want horizontal development, with a minimum of re-blocking and relocation. The mayor, according to his city planner Architect Diogracias Tablan, also wants housing for the residents, but in addition

wants to relocate poor families from surrounding areas, such as, San Nicolas, Quiapo, Isla Putting Bato and Maestranza. Other plans that sought to extend the reclamation of land out into the bay for use as oil depot sites and garbage landfill, or turn the whole of Baseco into a shipping facility minus the people, have been abandoned since January 18, 2002, when President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo issued a proclamation reserving Baseco for the housing of the residents and other poor families.

Jessica Amon introduced Glen Mabag, an UPA CO, to the leaders she had worked with and these became the nuclei of the new organizing effort. Mabag's first task was to gather enough people for an orientation meeting on PRRP plans to be given by the ADB consultants and officials of PRRP headed by Ms. Bingle Gutierrez. On a Sunday morning two weeks before Easter, Tony Mann and Levi Buenafe of the ADB explained to about 200 people crammed into the barangay building that Baseco was indeed a top priority area for urban renewal, that the people and their plans would be an intrinsic part of the overall planning and that no one would be moved in or out of Baseco till a final plan was agreed on. The last assurance was needed because there were rumors the government was prepared to evict people from the 10-meter EPA. The PRRC and the barangay Kapitana were absent from the meeting.

The people were very pleased. At first there seemed there would be competition from Sanlakas, a National Democratic organization. The group's leader announced at the end of the meeting that Sanlakas would hold its own meeting on the PRRP plans the following Sunday and would even offer merienda, which the UPA meeting hadn't. That was the last heard of Sanlakas, at least to the present. Their meeting, even with merienda, attracted few people.

The meeting with Mann and Buenafe gave Glen Mabag's efforts credibility. It guaranteed he was not subversive—or ADB certainly wouldn't be working with him—and it helped the people believe renewal was possible, and not idle fancy. A similar meeting in Parola the following week wasn't quite as successful. There was overt opposition from National Democratic groups who said they didn't believe any good could come from the ADB. The meeting was held in a small space, about the size of a classroom, squeezed between container shipping bins and people's houses. A canvas was thrown up to provide shade. The meeting ended when there was loud metallic banging and people looked out from under the canvas to see a huge container bin swing slowly back and forth over their heads.

In Baseco the organizing work picked up momentum. A steering committee of 20 members was set up, the Ad Hoc Committee of Kabalikat, who began to gather members. Two initiatives were soon started that would involve hundreds of people in the group's effort: the development of a "people's plan," and a family survey. The survey interviewed 721 families. While gathering information needed for the plan, the interviewers explained to the families what the PRRP master plan was and how they could take part in it through Kabalikat.

## **People's Plan**

Discussion of the people's plan was done block by block, usually with more than one meeting per block. On average 40 persons attended each meeting. Two young architects of the Technical Assistance Organization (TAO)-NGO, Arlene Lusterio and Faith Varona, led the discussions. They asked the people to describe how they wanted their future community to look and what kind of housing they preferred. They then sketched what the people described. If there were problems of space, for example, the architects pointed it out. If some facilities were missing, such as, schools, hospitals, churches, playgrounds, they also pointed it out, so that eventually the plan became quite realistic. The architects made three variations of the plan—for single detached, duplex and row houses—and the people chose the single-detached one. The plan called for reclamation of the lagoon. It included roads, facilities and room for small-scale business. Over 3,500 people took part in one or more meetings. This process continued from June to July.

In May, at Kabalikat's first general assembly with about 400 people present, officers were elected: Georgie Tenolete was chosen president, Diocel Candano, external vice president, Ross Acas, internal vice president, Editha Carillo, secretary, Wilfreda Corbo, treasurer, Yolanda Jamot, auditor, Juanita Vasquez, PRO and Pablito Sevillano, adviser. Tenolete is a checker of cargo, Candano is a carpenter, Acas a DSWD volunteer, Corbo, Jamot and Sevillano runs small sari-sari stores and Vasquez is involved in hog raising.

The organizing work developed rapidly for a number of reasons. One was the promise of PRRC-ADB funding which encouraged the people to believe something good could happen soon in their community. Secondly, there were no opposing POs or NGOs. Kabalikat was the only community-wide group working on land and housing issues. Thirdly, the means chosen, the survey and the people's plan, engaged large numbers of the residents in non-threatening, non-divisive activity. However Kabalikat's full time concentration on these pacific issues meant it had little experience in confrontation or claim-making with government officials over issues, basic services, for example, as happens regularly in other communities. As will be seen they were not successful in winning recognition of Kabalikat as the sole representative of the Baseco people in negotiations on land or housing issues or acceptance of their people's plan by the barangay officials or mayor. Perhaps the lack of experience in confrontation hurt them in these endeavors. It seems to have been a factor in their early inability to respond adequately to the problems brought by the fire.

On June 25 the Kabalikat leaders joined the April 30 Working Group, a coalition of urban poor community organizations in a meeting in Malacañang with President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. During the meeting the president announced she would give the land in Baseco to the people. She also promised to visit the area.

On July 10 she came. There was little warning about the visit. Kabalikat learned of it only a few hours before the president arrived and gathered people. She walked around the built-up part of the area, at the hub of the two "islands," and then met with the Kabalikat people and local barangay officials in the barangay hall. They ate together, sat around in a circle talking about the people's situation and hopes. Land security appeared to be a major need, so the president called Mayor Lito Atienza and while the people listened told him she was with the people of Baseco and she wondered if there would be any problem if she gave the land to the people. Put on the spot, to say the least, the mayor said there was no problem. The president again promised the people to give the land. The people were very happy needless to say.

October 27, a savings scheme was discussed. The savings would be for housing matters principally, but also for emergencies. Some 15 people agreed to start the program by saving themselves. They now have about P9,000. They are spreading the program through the different blocks, experimenting with schemes that will make daily deposits of even a peso possible.

In October also Senator Noli de Castro who is also a TV newscaster narrated a TV documentary on Baseco that Kabalikat found insulting since it concentrated wholly on what was bad, ugly and sensational in their area. In a letter they delivered to his office they accused him of deliberately insulting poor people by focusing on the bad side of Baseco and overlooking the good work the people had done over the years despite tremendous odds: the chapels, health center, pathways, water and light systems, the Kabalikat, the People's Plan and survey, etc. They invited him to come and make a fairer video. He never answered.

To forestall objections that Kabalikat doesn't represent all the people, NGOs and POs of Baseco, the Kabalikat invited all the groups to a session November 3, 2001. All in all the UPA survey had identified 34 such groups, including Kabalikat. Fifteen group leaders attended and signed a Memorandum of Agreement on basic principals that would guide their cooperative work on land and housing matters. Fifteen more organizations signed later. The larger group of leaders is called United Leaders of Baseco (ULB). Kabalikat sees them as a consultative group for Kabalikat. A meeting between the ULB, the PRRC and ADB consultants on November 13 will be reported later.

A four-week training of leaders was conducted by UPA from November 4-December 1. They formulated a vision, mission and goal for Kabalikat (see Appendix). The training was in analysis, conducting meetings, bookkeeping and planning. Three committees were formed to work on water, a bridge from the "Hub" to "La Playa," and the garbage. Not much has happened since in their committees though a new and hopeful initiative on water is being discussed. It will aim at individual or group meters distinct from the barangay system. Maynilad told the people they should only be paying P73 for twice for the water they now use, for which they are now paying on average of P330 a month. In general Kabalikat hasn't developed small issues. Kabalikat

discussed the water problem with Maynilad Water Company. They were asked to gather signatures stating the amounts they pay for water and requesting Maynilad to intervene. They were doing this when the fire hit.

February 12, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo went to Baseco to officially proclaim the area and set it aside for the residential use of the people living there.

It should have been a very happy occasion for Kabalikat, but it wasn't. The land was proclaimed, but they were ignored and treated poorly, they believe. In a focused group discussion held March 3 the leaders gave the president "0" on a scale of 1-10, with 1 the lowest and 10 the highest.

It is hard to correlate proclamation and a zero rating. The leaders remain as they were, supporters of former President Joseph Estrada and suspicious of the woman who unseated their hero. However, the promise of land and the actual proclamation should, it would seem, have mitigated those feelings somewhat. July 10, 2001 she sat around with the Kabalikat members and ate Kentucky Fried Chicken. Twice she met them in Malacañang with other leaders of the April 30 Working Group. Estrada never visited Baseco, nor did he do anything for it. Part of the explanation is had in what happened February 12, 2002 when the president came to Baseco to proclaim the land. According to the people she arrived hours late and then kept the crowd waiting even longer while she gave an interview for over an hour on stage with Korina Sanchez, which the people couldn't hear. Then the police and the tanods removed the Kabalikat people from the places in front of the stage and replaced them with people of the mayor and the Kapitana. Finally and this especially seems to have bothered the people, the police destroyed their small flags and banderitas that carried Kabalikat's name. Three weeks later at the FGD they were still angry and hurt. Also none of the people given certificates of occupancy were from Kabalikat. They were chosen by the barangay.

### **Inter-agency Meeting Task Force on Baseco**

Almost a month later HUDCC convened the first Inter-agency Task Force meeting on February 12, 2002. Present were Archt. Diogracias Tablan Jr. of Manila, PRRC Executive Director Bingle Gutierrez, HUDCC Director Mel Parilla, Levy Buenafe of ADB/TA-CBS, representatives from NCR-NHA, PPA, USO-Manila, PEA and Kabalikat.

HUDCC Director Parilla chaired the meeting and said Archt. Tablan and the city government should lead the Task Force and her office would co-chair.

Archt. Tablan informed the body that they have conducted a census-tagging in Baseco and found that the total population is 47,017 with 6,060 families and 3,499 structures. (This is different from the results of the socio-economic survey done by UPA and Kabalikat six (6) months ago when there were 4,419, about 5,000



nuclear families and altogether about 21,211 people). The estimated land area is 52 has. but only 25 has. are being occupied by dwellers at present. The rest of the area is under water, especially during high tide.

He also said Mayor Atienza plans to use Baseco for housing and as a “catchment” for families living under bridges and for the relocation of families from San Nicolas, Quiapo and Maestranza areas. He said there is no definite plan at present.

Arch. Tablan asked the people to present the People’s Plan which they did. Tablan had several times held meetings with Kabalikat to discuss their views on Baseco development. He was the only city official who did so.

Ross Acas, a Kabalikat officer, presented the People’s Plan. She said 3,500 took part in framing the plan and the big majority like on-site development with duplex-type housing and a lot area of 66 sq.m. each. This plan has considered the 1,000 families will be affected by the ten-meter easement and the reparation of the sea wall/dike. These families will be transferred into the lagoon area when it is reclaimed.

Arch. Tablan said it was clear to him that the community is in favor of development and that they prefer owning even a small parcel of land. He advised them that based on the People’s Plan and the results of the census, all present occupants would be accommodated. On-site development will be possible for all even if residents have to move for the reclamation and clearing of the ten-meter easement. He said he would like to have a copy of this plan.

This was the most positive reception the plan ever received from a local government official. Arch. Arlene Lusterio clarified that the plan meant that on-site development is not the concept of ‘as is, where is’ only but development with minimum reblocking and dislocation.

Arch. Tablan also explained that as of now their office has no definite plans, even for the rumored construction of MRBs in the area. And if they put MRBs there, it would not be for them but for other families dislocated around Manila.

Since there are several plans—PPA, PRRC, City of Manila and People’s Plan—all would be considered and consolidated using as a starting point for the action plan chosen by the Task Force, Tablan said, though this would seem, especially the PPA plan, to contradict the earlier statements he made and the purpose of the proclamation.

Before the meeting was finished, the Task Force members were identified. It is chaired by the City of Manila and co-chaired by HUDCC. The members are PCUP, PPA, PEA, POs, NGOs, PRRC, NAPC, DPWH and Barangay Council. Each agency would recommend permanent representatives, two from each (principal and alternative).

Kabalikat sits as an interim member only as the PO representative. NHA said there should be a consensus of POs on the people's representative body. Levy Buenafe challenged Kabalikat to prove that it was the only PO capable of representing the people. Others said there should be an election.

Kabalikat said it would be difficult to have an election because the barangay election is due in a few months and would complicate everything.

After the meeting Kabalikat leaders were disappointed because the group's position on the committee was still unstable. They felt they deserved to be part of the Task Force since it is their group that had been pursuing the issue from the start. They asked Levy why he has always seemed to undermine them. He knew their work why didn't he support them, they asked. They agreed to get the ULB leaders in writing to endorse Kabalikat as the representative and bring the document to the next meeting. Levy agreed to support this. No meeting has been called since.

By February 2002 or almost 10 months after the organizing began, Kabalikat had 3,500 members, a plan, confidence and good morale. It had yet to do with what is essential to a people's organization, namely, achieve full recognition of itself and its plans from government and the wider society, including on the government side the barangay, Mayor Lito Atienza, the ADB, national government agencies, the PRRC, the Inter-agency Task Force, the president herself; and on the non-government side the other NGOs and POs within Baseco, the Church and the media. Such recognition is acceptance of a PO's power and influence, and of its claim to be the voice of the people. For an organization interested in power, recognition of representative position and strength is crucial.

### **Second Interagency Meeting**

At the second Interagency Task Force on Baseco March 22, Mayor Atienza said in regard to people's participation in the Task Force, that he didn't want any one group or two groups to represent the people; he wanted all the groups to be present and speak for themselves. Kabalikat leaders and COs feel that while this statement has at first glance the appearance of democratic people's participation, in effect it is destructive of genuine and effective participation. If 30 or 40 groups are present the mayor and/or the barangay will control enough to divide the people's voice. Once there are divisions government will exploit the differences favoring in different ways the groups who go along with government, the leaders and COs believe.

## **Fire, April 29**

The Holy Saturday night fire rocked Kabalikat. It reacted slowly and indecisively. For the first five days the concern seemed to be to adapt the long-planned first year anniversary celebration to the post fire situation in Baseco. They planned to feed the victims a good hot meal on April 5 and they decided to return money gathered in a raffle. The date switched back and forth as news came the president would go to Baseco on April 5 her birthday. They switched the anniversary to April 6 and then when the president didn't come switched back to April 5. There was no feeding. Some 200-300 people attended plus visitors from other POs of the April 30 Working Group. Kabalikat seemed to have no plan to deal with the government's construction work. It had no list of victims, or even of its own members among the victims or its victim-leaders. It made no effort to get relief or to assist in relief operations. A visitor who listened to a Kabalikat leader said, "he talks like a government official," meaning he merely repeated government decisions. Another woman leader whose house almost burned was in shock for two days and later still seemed subdued.

Meanwhile the government went ahead with its plan to fill in the whole fire area, thus preventing hundreds of families from returning to their home lots. All the victims were kept in relief centers until the construction, whatever it might eventually include, was finished. Two months was given as a timetable for this work in the days after the fire.

How to explain the inactivity of Kabalikat?

The scale of the disaster is one factor. Whether the official victim total is 3,000 or more families or less, it is the largest urban poor fire in years. A third or more of Kabalikat members are victims and were consumed by the need to find relief. Fully armed soldiers prevented people from rebuilding their homes and the government started the road construction and land filling operations, a 100 truck loads of dirt a day rolled through the streets. Such movement dismayed the people and made it very difficult for them to resist or even to think about alternatives.

No one in Baseco felt secure after the fire. The non-victims fear their areas would also be burned. They hardly slept. The non-victim leaders were tired and fearful. One leader said: "I go to Kabalikat meetings, then I go home and help wash the clothes, bathe the kids, then more meetings, then I have to go to work to earn a living." He looked very tired.

Further as was noted earlier Kabalikat had smooth sailing in many ways from its beginnings. It came to some prominence through its people's plan and survey, but it had never undertaken issues that would involve conflict. Officials had refused to dialog with it and Kabalikat hadn't found ways to force dialog. It hadn't finished

issues that involved steadfastness in the face of government opposition, even in small issues. Now, suddenly when it was most threatened and least secure it had to deal with a massive government effort.

The lead CO was sick for some days after the fire. Did he feel overwhelmed?

On April 6, a visitor told of the way urban poor people in Bangkok handle fire situations, although they never had a fire of such size, he admitted. He said the most important thing was to make sure it was the fire victims themselves who worked for repossession of the land. This helped the organizers and leaders understand the uneven response of Kabalikat to the disaster. Persons who were not victims, who were worried their own houses were in danger were making decisions. They were well intentioned but didn't have the intensity or single-mindedness needed to rally the victims to deal with the government.

It was decided to form two Task Forces under Kabalikat: one, composed of victims, to deal with the land and housing problems, as the major problem, and the other of non-victims to deal with relief, donations, providing hot meals to children, etc. There was a sign of relief when the decision was reached. The non-victims who were at the meeting seemed to feel liberated from a burden they didn't know how to handle. The victims were also enthusiastic. A meeting was planned of Kabalikat victim-leaders. Friends from other urban poor areas that had experiences with fires would be invited to share their experience. The relief task force has located a center for relief operations and is ready to extend warm meals to children. Perhaps also to mothers of infants, pregnant women and the aged.

The Jesuit seminarians of Arrupe House on the Ateneo campus passed up meals once a week during Lent. They donated the money saved to Kabalikat for relief. The Peace and Equity Foundation indicated it would give help, but then said relief was not in their mandate. The Asian Development Bank Staff Association gave generously, as did the very departments of the Ateneo de Manila.

### **April 8 Task Force Land Created**

It's a very hot day. People greet each other back and forth "mainit." "Oo mainit." "Mainit talaga." Leaders meet at the new Kabalikat Center—a cleared lot on the main road leading to the fire area. It is the bare wooden frame of a house with a blue canvas as the roof. In front is a desk and blue Kabalikat banners; in the rear are piles of relief goods. People sit around on chairs and bags of food and clothing. The work on landfill is progressing rapidly—100 big truckloads of dirt a day—removing any try at immediate return to the land. It's clear nothing can be done until the landfill is finished which we are told will take another 30-40 days.

Kabalikat members have identified 300 Kabalikat members in the relief centers. People talk of how bad conditions are—children sick, children crying all night, no sleep, few or no toilets, garbage, bad smells, mosquitoes, and sardines till they come out their ears.

A woman offered a long intense prayer. All listened intently with their eyes closed. Then the meeting began.

People from East Triangle spoke of their experience with the fires. They had several times. Each time they defied the government and “crawled back to rebuild their houses even when the ground was hot.” There was an immediate good relationship between the people of East Triangle and of Baseco.

The facilitator asked the people, mostly fire victims, “What do you want?” Silence. “What do you want?” Silence, and then a man said, “A roof over our place on the relief center?”

“Will you be able to go back to your homes?” the facilitator asked.

“The barangay said so.”

“Do you believe that?” Silence.

“Are you sure you can go back?” Silence.

There was a dark slight woman with a baby in front. She looked at the facilitator open-mouthed.

“Maybe we should talk to the government agencies that helped us before. Like HUDCC,” the facilitator suggests.

Nobody spoke, so the facilitator addressed a victim leader who had gone back and built a lean-to on the spot where her house was. “Mayette, what do you think?” Mayette was making a list of Kabalikat fire victims.

“We must be sure,” she said.

They talked some more then it was decided to form a land and housing task force of fire victims only. “Who wants to be on the committee?” No one speaks. “Mayette, how about you?” Mayette agrees. A little while then people suggests Vangie, an older gray-haired woman. Then a younger woman Emilia agrees. And then many volunteer. They have to push a few men to join.

It is agreed they will meet the next day to study how they will proceed with their visits to HUDCC, the mayor and ADB.

Another task force of non-victims will take care of relief. They begin. People present their official victim card. The Kabalikat people asked some questions to verify if the person really is a victim, then they stamp the card. “Food or clothes?” they asked. Most choose food. By the end of the day 259 people get relief goods. It’s

done efficiently with good humor. While its going on, the leaders become more like their old selves. They laugh and tell stories. The dump trucks roll by one after the other shaking the houses and the ground underneath. They throw exhaust into the house along the road. Children narrowly miss being run over. The setting sun glows on the little boys playing. They have their T-shirts tied like capes around their necks. Dogs sniff each other next to two beautiful little girls, sisters, holding hands.

### **Some recommendations:**

1. An office is very important for a PO. It gives them a center or a focus for their work. It's someplace they can go to hear news, get support and relax.
2. Self-interest is essential. The victims have more at stake in returning to the land than the non-victims and will work harder.
3. People must do something. Giving out the relief goods was therapeutic in many ways, for example. It was a way of dealing in a small way with an awful situation. They resolve to set up a feeding center for children the following week.

### **April 28, A Day Before the President's Visit**

Kabalikat leaders meet in the upper room. It's always dark. One fluorescent lamp in corner. Cooking goes on in the other corner. Rough wooden floor, barefoot children in and out, the children of the neighbors. While waiting for the meeting to start an old lady explains her scheme for getting her name on the beneficiary list. Other women don't seem interested. Stories about the list: some renters are there; some structure owners are not; some non-fire victims, friends of Barangay are there, etc. Some Kabalikat members denied knowing anything about the Kabalikat's statement on renters and children's deaths when questioned by Barangay. "We have nothing to do 'with it,'" they said. The statement also talked about the need of an Award's Committee and the Interagency Task Force, six dead children, and omission of renters from beneficiaries. This denial was criticized.

At the meeting most people sit on mats on the floor. It's really not a good situation for discussions—it's noisy, people are not comfortable, too dark, etc. Need of an office that is well lit, quiet, etc. The discussions go on. It is agreed Kabalikat will attend the awarding ceremony April 29 and show the president there is a large group of residents who want the renter problem addressed. Some of the questions needing answers are proposed: Where will Kabalikat position itself? Will it march there? How will they greet GMA (as a friend or what)? How will they hide banners so they are not confiscated before GMA arrives? There is talk off and on through the meeting of the banderitas with the name Kabalikat on them: What color? What kind of stick? How attach them to stick, etc.? Who will yell out to get GMA's attention? There are two volunteers; one actually

does yell out during the event. Will Kabalikat be invited to talk as Secretary Soliman hinted or will it be invited at all? Do leaders understand the plan?

They role play women who will go to DSWD-Manila to get a formal invitation mentioned by Sec. Soliman. Three times the women repeat the simple message: "We are here to get the Kabalikat's invitation. Sec. Soliman said you can give it to us. We are from Kabalikat." Then they have it down. They resolve always to speak respectfully to GMA, even when calling out, for example, "Mahal na Pangulo..." Some seem to realize it's somehow momentous for poor women to yell out to catch the president's attention when they have never done anything like it before. There are suggestions about the questions raised and people perk up as a plan emerges. The meeting started late because they waited for leaders who have tasks at home. Rice and cabbage are being cooked in the corner. Every point is discussed from every angle, but the discussion is often side-tracked by unrelated matters. Someone says, for example, that some Muslims don't want to live together in a ghetto. They want to mix in with the Christians.

"It won't be like last time," a leader says, referring to the proclamation day where they were passive and took no action. "This time we'll act."

#### **April 29, Day of Visit**

\_\_\_\_\_ At 10:00am COs and leaders are sitting on the floor making banderitas. Seems there's no worry, anxiety about the president's coming, and Kabalikat's answer. They gossip about groups of people "at the bridge," about leaders, about barangay people.

"Bad news," a woman says coming into the room. "DSWD says there is no invitation." There is no room for POs at awarding ceremony.

A man whose wife is stranded in Saudi because she used a false name and her husband can't cash in an airline ticket to buy another to bring her home occupies everyone's attention. An important leader has gone to buy things not really needed. Plans are finished. Talk is loud because everyone is excited. A place for the assembly next to the stage is selected. Bass drum won't be used for fear it will be confiscated. Shouters should stay in the middle of Kabalikat group so won't be seen. They agree to argue with police about posters and prepare answers if police demand a permit, or try to remove them. "Hide posters till GMA arrives." A leader seeing a helicopter land and thinking GMA was on it will give the signal for the banners. GMA is not on copter and the police see and take some banners.

When all banderitas, ribbons and plans ready, the leaders relax. "How many people will come?" they are asked. At least 500, maybe 1,000. People seem eager. There are many questions in an observer's mind:

Are the ordinary members prepared for the action? Will the marcher be broken up? Will people lose their nerve? Leaders talk of a jealous husband. "He's a stand by," they say, dismissing him.

### **At the site**

\_\_\_\_\_The government has done quite an amazing job. One month after the fire, some 6-10 has have been filled in and look ready for houses. Some 750 families are to get awards of a lot. Four large tents are set up in front of a stage on the filled in earth that a month ago was black mud and the burned remains of houses. While Kabalikat people seek their place. City Hall is reading off the names of beneficiaries.

How many Kabalikat people join at the place near the stage? Some 200 plus. There are other Kabalikat people there but they want to stay under the tents in the shade. At the people's evaluation later the leaders say those leaders were also afraid. This is the first controversial action of Kabalikat. People don't know what to expect.

Percy Chavez of PCUP tells the writer the president, HUDCC and NAPC have all gone along with the mayors position on renters, because the mayor is "a powerful politician." He says the agencies urged the mayor to take care of renters, and they think he will. "There is no final policy," Percy stresses. (The next day Dory Katigbak, an old friend of the mayor, said he and the ADB people involved with Baseco had met and agreed upon a \$9 Million loan for 12 has. in Baseco. Dory brought up the subject of renters as chairman of UPA. The mayor said he will take care of the renters after the structure owners. This is what the mayor himself said at the end of the award ceremony.)

An observer might feel sad at some aspects of the day. Adults including young men scramble to get a free drink or crackers from government people handing them out. Police take banners. Why? What about freedom of speech? Police argue with Jeorgie Tenolete. The police say he has no right to show posters, etc., that is not the proper way to talk to the president. You must go through channels. Jeorgie argues heatedly. Police lead him away, but 15 Kabalikat people follow and surround the officer. People getting awards cheer on every cue. Some are Kabalikat members. None seem to care about the renters, their former neighbors. People who cheered Estrada, now just as easily on cue cheer GMA. Mayor Atienza calls himself "Ama ng Lungsod."

You can't fight a powerful mayor, much less a president, head on and win. They have so many resources of land, money, police, employees, etc. Necessary to work indirectly, in this case through ADB and HUDCC.

It's a very hot day, but there is a breeze. Baseco will be a nice place to live in.



Manila councilors talk. Their language seems patronizing. "You were water owners (meaning you lived on stilts over water). Now you're land owners. You must be grateful to the president and our beloved mayor."

Mayor speaks. Gets angry at banners visible to the side of the stage. "All right. We saw them. Take them down." He warns people not to listen to plans or ideas not his. Tell such people, "Get behind me Satanas." He seems eager, consciously or unconsciously, to divide community: renters/owners: "we": "they".

President speaks. She begins in the usual manner of politicians. She is coy, girlish. The style doesn't seem to suit her.

She says Baseco will be a relocation area for other slum areas. Not a word about renters, though she sees the signs and heard the leaders calling out. "On Sabado de Gloria, my feastday, there was the fire. Why on my feastday, I wondered. Now I know. This is Easter." She leaves soon after her talk and much of the crowd leaves with her. Aling Cita and Jeorgie ask her outside about the renters and she says, "I talked to the mayor about that."

Other NGOs and the church have no visible role.

A city councilor hangs onto GMA's car. To be seen? To ask a favor?

Outside is Atienza's son, Kim, a city councilor repeats his father's message, showing little concern for renters. Standing around are poor nursing mothers, towels over babies' heads to ward off heat.

Mayor is heard over loud speaker to say, "We will take care of the renters after house owners."

What is the judgment on the Kabalikat's effort. Is it that in the 200 plus present there is the nucleus of a strong people's organization? Or are the 200 is a small group divorced from the people's mainstream? Many leaders showed courage, know-how, quick responses to situations.

### **Evaluation, 3:30pm**

About 20-25 leaders, meet in a room next to the upstairs room usually used. It is larger, but same poor lighting, rough wooden floor. "What is our feeling?" the facilitator asks. "They saw our posters." "He said he would take care of the renters after the owners." "It's only verbal promise." "We did it," a woman says. A leader

of the renters with a sore tooth says, "We will wait and see if what the mayor said is good." "Wait how long?" she's asked. "Until June."

They criticize their fellow leaders and other Kabalikat members who stayed under the tents. "They were weak. They didn't cooperate. Heat was a reason, but they were also afraid, and perhaps they lack trust in us and didn't want to join something controversial."

Others: "We made the renters an issue. Without us the renters would be forgotten." Most agree that's true. It is Kabalikat that brought renter issue to mayor, HUDCC, ADB, DSWD, NAPC and eventually to the president.

They say many leaders acted well. They tell stories of leaders who fought with police for banners. "Who was afraid?" someone asks. Some raise hands. "We're not against GMA. We are renters. We have a right to go to her, to have a rally." "If there are many of us there is less to fear. We shouldn't be afraid."

Will there be a backlash? No one knows.

They agree the immediate work is to get hold of the victim list and the awarding list and find examples of anomalies to back up charges of manipulation and favoritism. Also a need to keep the issue alive through meetings with HUDCC, and the Interagency Task Force, and to work to set up an Awards Committee of government and people to screen beneficiaries. A five person committee is chosen. They decide also to go to ADB.

The meeting ended with ten claps for Kabalikat.

### **April 30 Staff Meeting.**

Roldan found low numbers disappointing. He said he was frightened when police seized his banner, but found he had strength and courage. "Now I know I can cope. People must get through similar process. I saw what struggle means."

Aling Cita: "Leaders showed courage. It was their first time. There was only a limited time to get the numbers we needed. We did much better than we did at Proclamation." In general, she thought, not enough groundwork done.

Stanley: “Leaders were ‘yabang.’ 3,000 members, but only 200 stood together. Some leaders were missing and people didn’t know what to do. But we reached our target, that is, to raise the issue of renters. Better than proclamation.”

Alice: “We shouldn’t criticize leaders for not doing groundwork. They have so many things to do.”

Looking back the rally of April 29 would have had more discipline and larger numbers if the people were used to controversy because of several mobilizations. People develop confidence when they experience fear and conquer it, just as Roldan said. Kabalikat did non-controversial matters before—people’s plan, survey, etc. not more demanding matters.

In conclusion, despite many weaknesses the April 29 rally and all the work about renters that led up to it was a success.

This ends for a time the detailed coverage of Kabalikat.

## **Summary**

Persuading the mayor to include the renters was an important victory. It affects renters throughout Baseco (victims and non-victims) perhaps 1,500 families in all, renters in Parola, perhaps 3,000 families, and in other areas of Manila, and possibly in other jurisdictions that might follow Manila’s example.

Kabalikat used the direct approach at the Award Ceremony, and the indirect approach through its meetings with ADB, HUDCC, NAPC, etc. Both are needed.

Kabalikat found that many of its 3,000 plus members are members in name only. They had 200 people who stuck it through the Award Ceremony action which was a demanding action for poor people. If they had organized better, that is, had a more systematic preparation of leaders, they could have had perhaps 500 all in all, which is a good number. If ten percent of a population are active members of an organization it is in good shape, some experts says. Baseco has 5,000-6,000 homes, so 500-600 people would be 10%.