

FROM THE GARBAGE DUMP TO HELL

by DENIS MARCHAND

Dressed in rags, thin and dirty, dozens of children pick through the pile of garbage in the middle of the immense municipal dump on the island of Cebu, in the Philippine archipelago. With their bare hands or using handcrafted picks, they collect everything that looks as though it can be used or sold.

Each day, they and their parents go through their paces. They feel at home in the garbage dump of Inayawan. It is here that they eat, sleep, play, and, more importantly, work.

This hellish life, which would make most of us shudder, is the lot of a great number of peasants who, leaving the misery of the countryside, converge on the cities, sustained by the hope of finding decent work and an adequate income. But factory jobs are scarce and employment prospects far from bright for those without special skills. Without jobs, their meagre savings disappear quickly. These rural exiles soon find themselves condemned to live by their wits.

To avoid starvation, these families are reduced to picking through the garbage, looking for something that can be resold. Rather than harvesting the fruits of the earth they know so well, they live in uncertainty, gathering the discards of a consumer society.

Pieces of metal, scrap iron, glass, plastic, paper, textiles, animal bones, and scraps of food represent the only hope of survival for these "scavenger" families. The smoke, the foul odours, the vermin crawling all around them, and the ubiquitous germs do not overly concern either the children or the adults. The garbage dump is their home.

Community with its own rules

Among the mountains of refuse, a site has been reserved for the makeshift residences of these "workers". Usually built with pieces of wood, cardboard, or sheet metal, each house barely has room for more than four people, though the average number per family is seven.

If fortune smiles on them at all, the "scavengers" will be able to eat scraps of meat,

fruits, or vegetables recovered from the piles of household garbage. Otherwise, they must settle for dried fish and a little corn. This poor diet, deficient in vitamins and protein, naturally causes major health problems among dump dwellers. Pregnant women in particular suffer from acute anemia, and the infant mortality rate is high.

To avoid the internal bickering that might poison their working environment, the "scavengers" have adopted a strict code. Work is done on an individual or family basis, and tacit agreements determine the rummaging area for each household.

Often, the men work more than 16 hours a day with only a handful of pesos to show for it. The work goes on late into the night, by the light of kerosene lamps lit by men and children over 10 years of age.

The arrival of a garbage truck inevitably triggers excitement. Some people cling to the vehicle, while others hurry to surround the spot where the cargo will be dumped.

"Alas, the future prospects for these people are bleak," affirms Estella Astilla, a professor at San Carlos University in Cebu who, with IDRC funding, has examined the problems of these marginal populations. "The government has never really shown an interest in recycling raw materials, and even less the will to regulate this area," she says. Prisoners of the chronic poverty of their families, the children in particular are threatened by serious social repercussions which may well destroy their prospects for a decent future.

Hired killers and pimps

Indeed, the children live on fertile ground for crime and prostitution. Almost all of the children living in the garbage dump abandon their education once they've completed elementary school in order to pick through the mounds of refuse, beside their father and older brothers and sisters. As they grow up, it is not uncommon for them to join bands of hired killers or to fall into the clutches of pimps who take them as prostitutes to the tourist areas of Manila or near the American military bases.

Many children are recruited or kidnapped in this way, and some end up in foreign countries, knowing no one, with no money or means of defence, slaves of a child labour or prostitution ring. In effect, they leave the garbage dump to enter a world more hellish still ■

Photos: Denis Marchand



Fertile ground for crime and prostitution. For children the options are bleak — scavenging among the garbage or walking the streets of Manila.



Denis Marchand is a Canadian freelance journalist who visited Asia as part of a project of the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec, funded by the Canadian International Development Agency.