

Submitted by:

Name: Zosimo Laurel Contreras

Title: Litigant in Philippine Property Dispute

Name of Committee: House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Title of Hearing: Property Rights and Development in Southeast Asia

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Greetings U.S. Congressman, Ed Royce, U.S. Congressman, Matt Salmon and Members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs:

My name is Zosimo Laurel Contreras. I am here today to represent my family and to express my great disappointment and heartache about our land in the city of Tagatay, Philippines. The land I am referring to was inherited by my mother, Adelina Laurel Contreras, from her father/my grandfather, Conrado Laurel. To give you a little background on my family, my grand uncle, Jose P. Laurel, was the late President of the Philippines, and his son, who served as Vice President of the Philippines, Salvador Laurel, is my second cousin. This inherited land is very, very important to us, as it would be for any family.

Early last year in January of 2014, I went to the Philippines to visit our property with my cousins. I was shocked when I saw fences, block walls and pineapple plantations on our land. Despite our 2001 court order for the “land grabbers” to vacate, they continue to occupy the land. While I was taking pictures of our property, someone came over to me and harassed and intimidated me asking what I was doing and why am I taking pictures. I told them “this is our property” and they told me the land is theirs. They told me that I own the title, but they “own” the land. They warned me not to go there anymore.

On June 15, 2014, I visited our land again and saw a big house being constructed on the property and there was no permit. Immediately after, we went to the Mayor’s office in Tagatay City to complain about the “land grabbers” activity. The Mayor’s office sent a letter to the settlers to “cease and desist” the construction. We also sent letters to the “land grabbers” to vacate the property by July 30, 2014 and they told us that we have to have a court order to execute the removal of the “land grabbers” on our property. At that time, we had our court order which gave us authority to remove them. They told us we need to leave and threatened us. We were outnumbered and intimidated by them as they told us to go home. The police, who were with us at the time, just stood there and didn’t help. We felt disappointed we didn’t have help from our local government authorities.

On another occasion, my cousin went to our land to have it surveyed and noticed the “land grabbers” removed the land markers. She then hired a surveyor to have the markers replaced and was harassed and threatened by the “land grabbers” who were carrying guns. They told my cousin that she could not continue surveying the land.

I was advised by my cousins and brothers in the Philippines that I should not go there alone because of the dangerous situation that might cause harm on me. The “land grabbers” had machetes, guns and we are outnumbered by them.

I am here to graciously ask for your assistance to work with the Philippine government and help my family keep our precious land which has been inherited through so many generations. We need your help!!! We cannot let the “land grabbers” control us. We cannot continue to feel helpless. Where is the JUSTICE?? Where is the Rule of Law in our Philippine Government? This is a serious situation. We should not be afraid to protect and visit OUR OWN LAND! As responsible land owners, my family continues to pay all the taxes on the property, however no one is representing us. The police, who were with us, acted helpless and scared. Where is the respect for the property owners and who will protect our rights? Please, please help us and the rest of the property owners who are victims of these “land grabbers”.

Thank you.