

International

# Record hunger in Philippines as coronavirus restrictions bite

## Charities struggling to meet the ever-growing demand for food

**MANILA:** Daniel Auminto lost his job and then his home when the coronavirus pandemic sent the Philippines into lockdown. Now he and his family live on the street, relying on food handouts to survive. Charities are struggling to meet the ever-growing demand for food as millions of families go hungry across the country.

COVID-19 restrictions have crippled the economy and thrown many out of work. "I've never seen hunger at this level before," said Jomar Fleras, executive director of Rise Against Hunger in the Philippines, which works with more than 40 partners to feed the poor.

"If you go out there everybody will tell you that they're more afraid of dying from hunger than dying from COVID. They don't care about COVID anymore."

The number of people going hungry has reached a record high during the pandemic, according to pollster Social Weather Stations. Nearly one-third of families—or 7.6 million households—did not have enough food to eat at least once in the previous three months, its September survey showed.

Among them were 2.2 million families experiencing "severe hunger"—the highest ever.

The numbers have been going up since May, two months after the country went into a severe lockdown—reversing a downward trend since 2012. Virus restrictions have been eased in recent months to allow more businesses to operate as the government seeks to revive the devastated economy, which is expected to shrink up to 9.5 percent this year.

For the country's legions of poor, the pandemic is just another challenge in their lives—and not even the most serious. Auminto, 41, spent years sleeping on the streets and eking out a meager living by

selling trash for recycling. His fortunes changed in 2019 when he found stable work as a building painter.

That gave him enough money to rent a room in Manila, which he shared with his wife and their two-year-old daughter, buy food and even save a little towards their dream of opening a small store.

### Then COVID-19 hit.

"We lost our home, my job. We even lost our clothes which were stolen from us," said Auminto as he sat in a park where the family sleeps on a flattened cardboard box at night. Before the pandemic "I planned to work and work our way out of poverty. It's for my family, so I can give them a better life, send my child to school."

Every day they join long queues of mostly homeless people to receive a free meal from an outdoor food pantry. On some days the family gets two meals from different pantries; other days it is just one. Sometimes they have no food at all.

Five days a week volunteers at a center in Manila run by the Roman Catholic order Society of the Divine Word prepare around a thousand meals of chicken, vegetables and rice that are packed into boxes and given to the hungry. Demand is constantly increasing, said Father Flavie Villanueva, who runs the program. "We started doing this in April and began with 250 (people lining up). It increased to 400, and then 600, then 800. Three weeks ago it was 1,000," Villanueva said.

"The majority are still homeless but there's a good number who are with homes but are desperate because there are no jobs." Hunger was already a major problem in the Philippines before the pandemic struck. About 59 million people were "moderately or severely food insecure" between 2017 and



**MANILA:** Volunteers at a Catholic religious order Society of the Divine Word center pack free meals to be distributed to street dwellers in Manila. Charities are struggling to meet the ever-growing demand for food as millions of families go hungry across the country where COVID-19 restrictions have crippled the economy and thrown many out of work. —AFP

2019 — the highest in Southeast Asia — the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization said in a report.

The impact of the virus on hunger has been exacerbated by a series of typhoons that have pummeled the country in recent months, destroying tens of thousands of homes. Fleras said food donations have soared during the pandemic, in part

because many factories forced to suspend operations gave away their surplus stock. But it is not enough to meet demand.

"We might reach 200,000 families this year," he said. Auminto said it was "painful" to have lost everything and be back on the street where he says the police treat them "like animals". —AFP

## Indonesia holds nationwide poll despite warnings

**JAKARTA:** Indonesia held nationwide regional elections yesterday with more than 100 million voters eligible to cast a ballot, despite warnings the poll would worsen the nation's Covid-19 crisis.

The archipelago of nearly 270 million—the world's third-biggest democracy and fourth most populous nation—delayed the vote originally set for September as it struggled to contain soaring infection rates.

From the capital Jakarta to the holiday island of Bali, polling station staff in full protective gear enforced social distancing and took voters' temperatures before polls closed at 1:00 pm local time (0600 GMT). Abdul Rahman Wahab, 24, admitted he was nervous about turning up to vote on Sulawesi island.

"Health is my priority for sure, but voting is also an important part of our life in a democratic country," he said. Islamist parties are looking to score big gains in the world's biggest Muslim-majority

nation as they ride a tide of rising religious conservatism. In the second-biggest city Surabaya workers followed the tradition of donning superhero costumes, dressing as Spiderman to lure voters in. Others were tasked with taking ballot boxes into hospitals so that Covid patients could vote from their sickbeds.

"All polling stations were disinfected," said Suprianto, head of a polling station committee in Jakarta's Ciputat district, who like many Indonesians goes by one name. "We made spaces as wide as possible to allow for social distancing. Voters were also required to wear masks. If you don't, then you won't be allowed in the polling station."

Voter Nur Oktaviani said the precautions had put her at ease. "I'm not worried," the 24-year-old told AFP. "Here, they're complying with health protocols."

### High risk

Hundreds of hopefuls—including President Joko Widodo's eldest son—are vying for 270 positions, including regional governors, district heads and mayors.

Official results are not expected for several weeks. At least four election candidates have died so far, according to independent research group



**Gibran Rakabuming Raka (center), the son of Indonesia's President Joko Widodo, rides a bicycle to meet supporters after declaring victory in the mayoral election in Solo yesterday. —AFP**

LaporCovid, and more than 1,000 election agency staff were infected ahead of voting day. Over 580,000 Indonesians have contracted the illness while the death toll stands at 18,000. But the true scale of the crisis is widely believed to be much bigger, as testing rates are low. Infections could skyrocket above one million after polling day, warned Hermawan Saputra at the Indonesian Public Health Experts' Association. —AFP

## Kim's sister slams S Korean minister over coronavirus

**SEOUL:** The sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has slammed the South's foreign minister as "impudent" for casting doubt over Pyongyang's claim that the country has no coronavirus cases, state media reported yesterday. Nuclear-armed Pyongyang closed its borders in January, sealing itself off from the outside world in an effort to avoid contamination, and has long insisted that it has had no cases. Kim himself reiterated the claim at a huge military parade in October.

Experts suggest it is unlikely, given that the virus first emerged in neighboring China, its main provider of trade and aid. South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha told a forum in Bahrain on Saturday that it was "hard to believe" that the North had no coronavirus cases, adding that Pyongyang had been unresponsive to Seoul's offers to help tackle the disease. The pandemic "in fact has made North Korea more North Korea-ie

more closed, very top-down decision-making process where there is very little debate on their measures dealing with Covid-19", Kang said.

"All signs are that the regime is very intensely focused on controlling the disease that they say they don't have," Kim Yo Jong, sister and key adviser to the North Korean leader, condemned Kang in a statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency yesterday, calling her comments "impudent" and accusing her of seeking to worsen the already strained inter-Korean relationship.

"It can be seen from the reckless remarks made by her without any consideration of the consequences that she is too eager to further chill the frozen relations between the north and south of Korea," Kim said. "We will never forget her words and she might have to pay dearly for it." The statement came with discussions between Pyongyang and both Washington and Seoul at a standstill following the collapse of the 2019 Hanoi summit between Kim and US President Donald Trump over what the North would be willing to give up in exchange for sanctions relief.

In June, Pyongyang blew up a liaison office with the South on its side of the border—paid for by Seoul—saying it had no interest in talks. The North



**This picture shows Kim Jung-sook, a sister of former South Korean dictator Park Chung-hee's assassin Kim Jae-kyu, speaking during an interview at her home in Paju. —AFP**

also has yet to comment on the election of Joe Biden as US president, nor has its state media reported the result. Biden has previously characterized Kim Jong Un as a "thug". Kim Yo Jong's statement came with US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun, who has led denuclearization talks with Pyongyang under the Trump administration, currently on a visit to Seoul. —AFP

## Five dead in Ghana election violence as accusations fly

**ACCRA:** Five people have been killed in election-related violence in Ghana, police said yesterday, casting a shadow over a country hailed for its stable democracy. The deaths were reported as early results confirmed a tight race for the presidency and Ghana's neighbors urged political camps to uphold a peaceful outcome after trading heated accusations.

"Sixty-one electoral and post-electoral incidents nationwide" were reported, the police said in a statement. Of these, 21 "are true cases of electoral violence, six of which involve gunshots resulting in the death of five."

The electoral commission published results from seven out of the country's 16 regions, pointing to a narrow

lead by opposition candidate John Mahama over outgoing president Nana Akufo-Addo. Monday's presidential and parliamentary vote has been viewed by observers as generally free and fair.

But Mahama late Tuesday accused Akufo-Addo of showing "credentials that are very undemocratic" and harnessing the military to sway the outcome. "You cannot use the military to try and overturn some of the results in constituencies that we have won. We will resist any attempts to subvert the sovereign will of the Ghanaian people," the 62-year-old former president said.

He made the accusations after rumors circulated on social media that he had conceded defeat. Hours earlier, the presidency — releasing an unofficial tally — claimed Akufo-Addo was ahead with 52.25 percent of the vote, against Mahama's 46.44 percent. Information Minister Kojo Opong Nkrumah told a press conference that allegations of intimidation by soldiers were false.

He also bluntly rejected Mahama's claim that his party had won a majority, of 140 seats, in the 275-member parliament. "No candidates at this stage should undermine



**ACCRA:** Supporters of the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) sing, dance and gesture on the main road of the Electoral Commission on Tuesday. —AFP

the work of the EC (electoral commission), it is irresponsible and it would endanger the peace of this country," Opong Nkrumah warned. —AFP

### News in brief

#### Kiwis mark volcano anniversary

**WELLINGTON:** New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern paid emotional tribute to victims of the White Island volcano eruption yesterday on the first anniversary of the disaster that claimed 22 lives. Almost 50 people, mostly Australian tourists, were on the island, also known as Whakaari, in December last year when a column of burning ash and steam blasted from a volcanic vent. The eruption killed 22 and left dozens more with horrific injuries, prompting a massive medical operation that saw victims treated in burns units across New Zealand and Australia. Ardern said the disaster was "devastating" for all New Zealanders, as well as families of victims in Australia, Britain, Germany, the United States, China and Malaysia.

#### Cameroon lifts Kamto blockade

**YAOUND, Cameroon:** Cameroon police, who have been surrounding the home of opposition leader Maurice Kamto since September, have lifted the effective house arrest, his party said Tuesday. Kamto, who lost to President Paul Biya in 2018's election, has been prevented from leaving his home since the eve of a peaceful protest march in the capital Yaounde on September 22 when demonstrators called for Biya to go. Kamto had been imprisoned in January 2019 following a march protesting the vote. Biya ordered him freed nine months later under international pressure. —AFP

#### Prison term for Sarkozy sought

**PARIS:** Prosecutors in the landmark corruption trial of French ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy on Tuesday called for him to be sentenced to a prison term of four years of which he should serve two. The 65-year-old rightwinger, the country's first modern head of state to appear in the dock, is accused of trying to bribe a judge with a plum retirement job in exchange for inside information on an inquiry into his campaign finances. Prosecutors asked for the same punishment for Sarkozy's lawyer and co-defendant, Thierry Herzog, as well as for the judge, Gilbert Azibert. They also said Herzog should also be disbarred for five years. —AFP

#### Arrest warrant for French skater

**NEW YORK:** Florida has issued an arrest warrant for French figure skater Morgan Cipres over allegations he sent obscene photos to a 13-year-old girl, the alleged victim's lawyer said yesterday. Attorney Andrea Lewis said prosecutors accuse the 29-year-old — who announced his retirement in September — of transmitting harmful material to a minor by electronic means in December 2017. In Florida, the offense is punishable by up to five years in prison. Lewis said investigators were in possession of photos allegedly sent by Cipres. Contacted by AFP for comment, the Florida state attorney's office did not respond. —AFP