

Philippines: Farmers win Hacienda Luisita battle



Farmers win Hacienda Luisita battle

Farmers of the sugar estate owned by President Benigno Aquino's family claimed victory in their decades-old struggle as the Supreme Court ruled in their favor yesterday.

The court affirmed its November 2011 ruling ordering distribution of the 4,916 hectares of Hacienda Luisita and rejecting offers of shares of stock. —

In its final ruling today, the court also junked the plea of land owners – Aquino's maternal side of the family – for payment based on current fair market value. It fixed the land value to 1989 prices when the estate was put under the government's agrarian reform program.

"First thing tomorrow, we will start tilling our land," said Felix Nakpil Jr., chairman of the Alliance of Farmers of Hacienda Luisita, the primary petitioner in the case.

Last November, the court unanimously agreed that the land should be distributed to the original 6,296 beneficiaries, as ruled by the Presidential Agrarian Reform Council in December 2005.

"This is a victory for genuine agrarian reform," Nakpil said, almost in tears as the decision was announced four hours after he and some 100 farmers waited outside a Supreme Court office in Baguio City. "We are very happy."

"At long last, thousands of farmers achieved justice," added Lito Bahis, president of the United Luisita Workers Union.

"It should have been total land distribution from the start," he said, although he considers today's decision as a dream comes true. "It's a result of continuous struggle."

At least seven farmers have been killed and seven others disappeared without a trace in their 23-year campaign to gain control of the contested land.

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