Tribe returns to old ways on Pinatubo / 1991 eruption drove Aeta away from volcano

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2001-11-11 04:00:00 PDT Tarukan, Philippines -- This tiny hamlet of aboriginal tribesmen is slowly returning to its prosperous past.

Ten years ago, Tarukan was home to hundreds of families of a Filipino tribe called the Aeta. But after nearby Mount Pinatubo erupted in 1991, villagers were forced to evacuate to government-run centers far from their forest habitat. Earlier this year, 50 villagers opted to come home to relive a lifestyle they thought they would never see again. The 50,000-member tribe has long survived along the slopes of the volcano by fishing, hunting wild boar, deer, birds and mountain cats and farming beans, rice, sweet potatoes and root crops. They had no need to use money.

On June 15, 1991, Mount Pinatubo erupted after remaining dormant for more than 400 years. The volcano spewed ash 25 miles into the sky and rained down sand and rocks for weeks, reaching Manila, 60 miles to the north, and as far away as Indonesia. The eruption killed hundreds, forced the United States to close Clark Air Force base in Angeles City near Pinatubo, destroyed 207,862 acres of agricultural land and wiped out entire villages such as Tarukan. The U.S. Geological Survey called the eruption the second largest of the 20th century after Mont Pelee, which blew its top in 1902 on the Caribbean island of Martinique.

A DIFFERENT LIFE

Forced to flee to the lowland valleys below, the Aeta learned a life far different from their mountain habitat. They shed traditional loincloths, sarongs and bare feet for Western dress and shoes, ate from canned foods donated by relief agencies and slept in cramped resettlement centers that resembled refugee camps. At the time, the National Commission for Indigenous People listed 5,133 Aeta families in 10 such camps.

In the government-run centers, the Aeta soon suffered from malnutrition and diseases that they rarely encountered before -- measles, chicken pox and dysentery. Scores died, village elders say.

"The Aetas feel ill at ease in the lowlands, where life does not relate to their culture," said Rufimo Tima, an anthropologist who has studied the tribe for 30 years. Unable to return to the mountains, tribal members were unprepared to seek new livelihoods in cities.

NEW SKILLS LEARNED

The government taught them how to make handicrafts from jungle materials. Some worked at the former Clark base, which has since been turned into a special economic zone of duty-free shops and casinos. Others sold vegetables or toiled as janitors and gardeners. The most enterprising taught jungle survival tactics to tourists.

Mocked by lowlanders for their primitive ways, the Aetas put up with insults, discrimination and Christian missionaries who urged them to convert. "We were treated like monkeys," complained 80-year-old villager Cosme Libring. In 1995, a small group of Aetas returned to their old life. By 1998, an estimated 2,000 families had left the resettlements. Even those who still reside in refugee camps are prone to leave for weeks to till small mountain plots. "They are very attached to their home," said Tima. "The fact they are going back is a sign of their resistance to assimilation by mainstream society."

NEW SITE FOR VILLAGE

Tarukan residents moved six times after the eruption before resettling near Santa Juliana, a village located just 2 1/2 miles from their original community and a popular jumping-off place for tourists who want to climb the volcano. In Tarukan, they have built bamboo huts and cleared fields for crops. Papaya and mango trees have been planted. Wild boar and birds are coming back and the acidity of the soil has declined, allowing farmers to resume planting. "When we arrived, there were many weeds and no trees," said villager Pauley Cosme. "The soil is quite different from what we used to know."

THREATS TO TRADITION

Yet the Aeta are also aware that their life will never be the same. Overpopulation in lowland areas is a serious problem, making the Pinatubo region an attractive site for would-be colonists. In the near future, the soil along the slopes of the volcano is expected to once again become fertile, attracting large agricultural interests. "Businessmen are looking for a large surface of land to plant commercial crops such as sugar cane," said Tima. "They have been offering leases to the tribe, which is quite tempting." As a result, there is a bill before Congress to protect the Aeta from shady land deals by declaring Pinatubo an ancestral domain that cannot be sold. A 1997 Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act already gives them the legal right to claim communal ownership over traditional lands. The Aeta have traditionally placed no monetary value on land since they have always moved from site to site. But that changed after the eruption, because there is now less forest and increased tourism.

TOURIST DESTINATION

In fact, Mount Pinatubo is such a fashionable adventure destination for Filipino and foreign tourists that Manila's largest travel agencies are studying the area's tourist potential. Tourists are anxious to climb the 4,740- foot volcano and then swim in the sky-blue crater lake that sits in the middle of it. About 3,500 people scale it every year between October and April.

As a result, some Aetas are being hired as mountain guides and porters. Tourist dollars are paying for water pumps, seeds and medicines for the ill. "It is a good source of income and less tiring than farming," noted villager Fred Pan. In recent months, however, heavy rains have caused the water level in the crater lake to rise and threaten to flood villages as far as 25 miles away. The eruption literally blew the volcano's top off, leaving a 2-square-mile hole in its summit. The opening has acted as a collecting pot for rainwater. Government geologists, Aeta tribesmen with picks and shovels, police and soldiers have tried to drain the lake by carving a canal in the volcano's crater to release the water slowly. Tarukan residents, however, have not been affected since the crack is on the other side of the volcano. Most remain upbeat about being home.

"The mountain belongs to us. We are really happy to be back," villager Pan Borongul said. "In the lowlands, we were strangers."