

Human rights stories in a cup:

# Journey of advocacy-driven Silingan Coffee

By Miguel Hanz L. Antivola  
Reporter

SILINGAN COFFEE, founded by Redemptorist brother, photojournalist, and entrepreneur Ciriaco B. Santiago III, is not just a business; it is a platform dedicated to keeping alive the stories of victims of extrajudicial killings (EJK) and promoting human rights in the Philippines.

“Our vision is to keep the nation’s stories alive and promote human rights,” Mr. Santiago said in an interview with *BusinessWorld*. “They are the living testaments of the crimes that happened in six years.”

The establishment of Silingan Coffee in Cubao, Quezon City, traces back to the height of the pandemic when Mr. Santiago, on his mission to deliver food packs to underserved communities, witnessed the dire need for support among families affected by EJK.

“I started roaming around communities to bring food packs, vegetables, or anything that can help mothers of victims of EJK, even as far as Bulacan, Quezon, Laguna, and Batangas,” Mr. Santiago said.

The Philippines fell three spots to 100<sup>th</sup> out of 142 countries in the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index this year, remaining among the weakest in the region

and better only than Myanmar and Cambodia.

The government estimated over 6,000 suspected drug dealers killed in police operations during the term of former President Rodrigo R. Duterte. Human rights groups, however, suggested a much higher figure of up to 30,000 individuals.

More than 30 member states of the United Nations Human Rights Council urged the Philippine government in November last year to take action on extrajudicial killings in connection with Mr. Duterte’s anti-illegal drug campaign.

## STAFF AND STORIES

What sets Silingan Coffee apart is its dedicated staff — all direct family members of EJK victims.

“They are victims whose cases happened before Duterte withdrew [the Philippines] from the ICC (International Criminal Court) in March 19, 2018,” Mr. Santiago said.

“Some are known cases whose stories are followed by other media entities, while some are unknown and have no idea how to pursue their case,” he added.

Among the employees is Mary Ann Domingo, who has been assisted by the National Union of People’s Lawyers since 2017 in filing cases against the policemen involved in the arrest of her husband and son in 2016. The legal

battles are ongoing, Mr. Santiago said.

The Navotas Regional Trial Court dismissed the four-year case of Grace Garganta, a team lead barista in Silingan Coffee, in October on the ground of demurrer to evidence filed by her, according to a court document shared with *BusinessWorld*.

The Court said that there was “no valid warrantless arrest” for Ms. Garganta when the arresting officers conducted a buy-bust operation on Jan. 16, 2019, against her husband.

“We evolve not simply because of our coffee, but because of their stories — the nation’s stories,” Mr. Santiago said, shedding light on the deep connection between the business and the personal narratives of its employees.

## CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS

The journey of Silingan Coffee has been fraught with financial challenges, especially during its first year when the pandemic-induced lockdown measures took a toll on businesses.

The profits were barely enough to sustain the initial eight employees and expenses due to the lockdown measures, Mr. Santiago noted.

To keep the business afloat, Mr. Santiago had to make personal sacrifices, selling his camera lenses, and taking loans from friends.

“In business, you have to take loans, and you can do that if you have good standing and credibility with them,” he said.

He said the slow growth during the first year did not deter his team. Silingan Coffee remained steadfast in its commitment to the vision, even when faced with financial uncertainty, he added.

## EXPANSION PLANS

As the lockdowns eased and Silingan Coffee gained attention from local and international media, Mr. Santiago and his team realized the potential to expand their impact.

An assembly with the staff was organized to discuss the vision-mission for the future, leading to the decision to move outside Cubao, Quezon City.

The strategic expansion plan includes the use of mobile vans renovated to fit the business, targeting churches and communities that were hotspots for EJK.

Mr. Santiago took more loans to purchase an old van in Laguna, recognizing its potential to reach areas that needed the advocacy the most.

“It needs to go to churches and communities, which were the hotspots of the killings,” he said.

The business envisions a total of four vans and one physical store within a five-year timeframe.

Additionally, plans to produce and sell candles are in the

pipeline to cater to mothers and elderly individuals who may not be able to become baristas, Mr. Santiago said.

## SUSTAINING AN ADVOCACY-DRIVEN BUSINESS

Running an advocacy-driven business comes with its unique set of challenges and responsibilities, according to Mr. Santiago.

“One must have a clear and courageous vision for something like this,” he advised to those considering a similar path.

“And you need to give back to the community, which means loving your staff.”

The staff at Silingan Coffee not only represents the cause but embodies the hope for justice, he also said. “They will fight for their cases even if they feel they can’t do anything.”

The importance of fair treatment and compensation for the staff is highlighted as a core principle in sustaining an advocacy-driven business, Mr. Santiago noted.

Beyond just serving coffee, Silingan Coffee strives to create a supportive and empowering environment for its employees, he added.



## DEMAND FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Silingan Coffee transcends the conventional definition of a business by actively demanding accountability for past injustices.

The business, Mr. Santiago said, goes beyond profit-making to continuously share the narratives of EJK victims, acting as a voice for those who have been silenced.

“We evolve not simply because of our coffee, but because of their stories — the nation’s stories,” he said, emphasizing the role of the business in demanding justice and accountability.

As of now, Silingan Coffee boasts a team of 28 baristas and 30 candlemakers.

The numbers, however, tell only part of the story. For Mr. Santiago, the true success of Silingan Coffee lies in the human stories it has touched and the hope it has instilled in the hearts of its employees.



WSP, INC.

A BIRD’S eye view of Brgy. Pawa and the Nabas wind power project.

## PetroWind gets fiscal perks for Nabas-2 wind power project in Aklan

PETROWIND Energy, Inc. has been granted fiscal incentives by the Board of Investments (BoI) for its 13.2-megawatt (MW) Nabas-2 wind power project in Aklan province, the renewable energy firm said on Tuesday.

Francisco G. Delfin, Jr., president and chief executive officer of PetroGreen Energy Corp., said in an e-mailed statement that the approval of the incentives registration “will boost the power generation capacity of our service contract block.”

PetroWind is a joint venture of PetroGreen, the renewable energy arm of Yuchengco-led listed firm PetroEnergy Resources Corp., EEI Power Corp., and BCPG Public Co. Ltd. of Thailand.

Mr. Delfin said the project would contribute to the Department of Energy’s goal of making Western Visayas “a renewable energy (RE) hub of the country.”

PetroWind quoted BoI Managing Head and Trade Undersecretary Ceferino S. Rodolfo as saying that with the approval of the registration application for the P2.57-billion Nabas-2 wind farm, “we are grateful to the Yuchengco Group and Thailand’s Bangchak Group for their continuing trust and investment in the country.”

Under Executive Order No. 226 or the Omnibus Investments Code of 1987, a qualified enterprise may enjoy certain benefits and incentives provided it invests in preferred areas of investments enumerated in the Investment Priorities Plan.

In March, the company signed a 15-year term loan agreement worth P1.8 billion with the Development Bank of the Philippines.

The loan will fund the company’s major infrastructure buildup, which includes the installation of wind turbine generators, the construction of a temporary jetty, internal access roads, and a new substation and switching station.

PetroWind targets to complete the second phase of the project by 2024.

The Nabas-2 project is located south of the existing 36-MW Nabas-1 wind power project, which has been transmitting power since 2015.

Last month, PetroWind said it had started the second phase of the Nabas-1 wind power project, which would add six turbine generators to the existing 18 of the first phase.

The expansion will enable the company to increase the wind project’s capacity to 50 MW from 36 MW.

In the third quarter, PetroEnergy reported an attributable net income of P167.95 million, up 51.3% from P111.03 million recorded last year.

Gross revenues increased by 47.6% to P959.51 million from P649.92 million previously.

On Tuesday, shares of PetroEnergy went down by one centavo or 0.22% to close at P4.57 apiece. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

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