WHEN rice prices suddenly went berserk in the first quarter of 2008, panic hit Filipino homes. The staple food of almost all Filipinos, rice—and the shortage of rice—is literally a life-and-death issue for the entire country.

It took the government agencies quite awhile to work out a support system that would provide cheaper rice to the larger population. There were the requisite blame-throwing, the “threats” of Senate investigation, the denials, and the usual “informed analyses.” Most distasteful and callous of all, there was the official announcement that there was no rice shortage or crisis, just rice “price elevation.”

However loud the government tries to convince us that there is no shortage, there is no denying the long lines that form in National Food Authority (NFA) outlets where rice is available at government-subsidized prices.

While queueing up for their daily rations of rice, three members of Kongreso ng Pagkakaisa ng mga Maralita ng Lungsod (KPML), an urban poor organization, listened to the woes of those who, daily, had to endure the ordeal of lining up for a kilo or two of cheaper rice. Ligaya Acosta, Julie Quijano and Janet Lutan, recount the stories they culled from the other women they met in the NFA outlets of Malabon, Navotas and Caloocan.

Ligaya Acosta

I met Aling Corazon, a 50-year-old mother who takes care of three unmarried sons and a three-year-old grandson. She lives in Dagat-Dagatan, in Caloocan.

Compare to most of the women who were also waiting for their turn to secure their daily stock of rice,
Aling Corazon was relatively better off. Her husband was employed by the city government as a metro aide, earning about P8,000 a month. And compared to other urban poor households, her family was also smaller. But like the rest of us in the line, Aling Corazon felt the pinch of hardship just as acutely.

“We consume two kilos of rice every day,” Aling Corazon told me. One kilo is cooked for lunch; another for supper. What about breakfast, I asked. “Tipid na lang,” she simply told me. For breakfast, they just gulp down a cup of coffee.

While Aling Corazon has access to an NFA outlet, she complains that at P25/kilo, NFA rice is still expensive. Add to this the exhausting task of waiting in line. “It is very hot,” she explains. She recalls waiting in line for more than two hours, under the heat of the sun. “Minsan may mga sumisingit sa unahan. Pag nangyayari yan at walang tanod na nakabantay, talagang halos magmurahan ang mga nakapila.”

Indeed, it’s not only physical stamina that one needs in these lines; one also needs fortitude. And even a sense of humor. One’s patience is severely tested, especially if one lines up for at least two hours, only to be told that the stocks had run out when one reaches the front.

If she had a choice, Aling Corazon says she would rather not join the queue.

But like the rest of us, this 50-year-old mother had no choice but to line up, like a prison inmate, for her ration of survival.

Janet Lutan

I met Jocelyn, Honoria and Ludy in front of the rolling store selling NFA rice in Malabon.

Jocelyn has three kids, although her household consists of nine – including in-laws, a cousin and a grandmother. Her husband earns about P300/day, which she tries to stretch for all the household expenses: rent, electricity and water bills, food and all the other needs of her children. Nine mouths consume at least 3 kilos a day, she told me.

But most of the time, the outlets will only sell 2 kilos per person. And that’s on a lucky day. Jocelyn told me she had experienced when stocks would run out before she could reach the front for her turn to buy. No wonder frustrations run high, and tempers usually flare up, she says. On one occasion, she was told that the store could not sell any more rice. There was still available stock, but she was told that this was already earmarked for the barangay tanods.

Honoria, a mother of five, recalls lining up at 6:00 AM. She was able to get her 2 kilos past 12:00 noon.

Lining up for 2 kilos of rice has become a daily routine for a lot of mothers. I wish they would sell more, so we don’t have to suffer through the long and tiring lines. But the people who sold the grains told us that if they don’t limit the volume, the stocks would immediately run out. They feared those who couldn’t buy would riot. Somehow, I can’t blame people if they become too angry. Imagine going home empty-handed, to tell your family at home that they cannot eat that day.

Julie Quijano

Beng, Doding, Maria and a few others shared their stories with me. Beng had also experienced going home without any purchase, because by the time her turn came, there was no more rice to be bought. She doesn’t want that to happen again. So now she has a mental map of all the outlets near her place. In case one runs out of stock, she could rush to another outlet. “Kahit saan pumipila siya.”

Doding, just like everyone else, had problems with the long lines that sometimes end in front of an empty sack. Maria told me about quarrels that erupt among the hungry and impatient people because the ones managing the stores would arrange it so that their friends would get ahead in the lines. As for Cyril and Me-Ann, they find the NFA rice unpalatable. But with commercial rice selling at P36-40/kilo, they had to set aside their discriminating tastebuds.