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Philippines: Safety of civilians must be ensured

The safety of civilians in Mindanao must be ensured, Amnesty International said today following the end of Tuesday's one-day ceasefire between government troops and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters in central Mindanao, in the southern Philippines.

Conflicting reports indicate that between 17 and 175 people have been killed in the fighting which resumed and escalated following the end of the ceasefire. Amnesty International is gravely concerned by reports by government forces that seven of those killed were civilians and that civilians have allegedly been taken hostage by the MILF.

The violence which began near the town of Pikit, but has since spread to neighbouring provinces, has reportedly displaced upwards of 40,000 civilians. Although the majority of the fighting has reportedly been between government forces and the MILF, government officials have stated that their intention was not to target the MILF but a kidnap gang allegedly operating in the area.

"All parties in the conflict have an obligation to abide by Article 3 of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949," Amnesty International said.

The article, which applies to governments and armed opposition groups alike, prohibits the torture or deliberate killing of civilians taking no part in the fighting. It also forbids the taking of hostages, and the harming of those who are wounded, captured or seeking to surrender.

"All parties to any conflict have a responsibility to respect the lives of civilians," the international human rights organization emphasized.

Background

Political tensions on the island of Mindanao and surrounding islands have featured prominently since the 1970s. Mindanao and surrounding islands are home to the majority of Muslims in the predominantly Catholic nation. Sporadic peace talks between the Philippine Government and the largest armed Islamic separatist group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), have continued to falter, amid hostilities on both sides.

In recent years serious human rights abuses have been committed by both government forces and armed opposition groups in the context of the conflict in Mindanao.

Amnesty International condemns abuses committed by governments and government forces as well those by armed opposition groups. Its stand, however, does not carry a connotation of recognition, or condemnation of that group, nor does it constitute a comment on the legitimacy of its goals or political program.

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