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Philippines: Mindanao civilians under threat from MILF units and militias

Tens of thousands of civilians who have already suffered from the renewal of violence in Mindanao could be at even greater risk if the Philippine government supports the creation of untrained and unaccountable civilian militias, Amnesty International said today.

Armed conflict in Mindanao escalated after 4 August, when the Supreme Court suspended a peace agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). After 4 August, a number of MILF units occupied farmlands in North Cotabato province and burned houses, displacing more than 150,000 people. Two weeks later, MILF units in Lanao del Norte province engaged in attacks on civilians, hostage taking, bombings and arson, forcing another 50,000 people to flee their homes. The MILF central leadership has denied ordering the attacks carried out by two of their commanders.

The MILF has justified some of its recent attacks by claiming that it was targeting Civil Volunteer Organization (CVO) forces and other police auxiliaries, established by local government as emergency protection.

“MILF units that targeted villages have engaged in serious violations of international law and should be held to account,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific Director.

“But experience from around the world shows that the deployment of civilian militias can set off a chain of reprisals and only increases the danger facing civilians.”

“All sides to this conflict should step back from the brink and demonstrate their commitment to avoid harming civilians. The MILF must control its forces, and the Philippine government should take responsibility for the security of all peoples in the Philippines, regardless of religion or ethnicity,” said Sam Zarifi.

Amnesty International has verified that local political leaders in Mindanao’s Iligan City and North Cotabato province led efforts to form civilian militias after the MILF attacks. In Iligan City, the site of two bomb attacks on 17 August blamed on MILF elements, a group of 300 licensed gun owners, politicians and local government officials have set up a civilian militia called “God Save Iligan City”. In North Cotabato province, armed civilians have already formed village militias, also known locally as CVOs. Local security officials reportedly rejected a request from North Cotabato’s vice governor to provide ammunition for the CVO. However, Amnesty International has confirmed that local patrons have already supplied guns and ammunition to CVOs and police auxiliaries.

In Western Mindanao, the Provincial Peace and Order Council composed of civil society, military and local

authorities in Zamboanga del Norte province decided to arm CVOs on 19 August. Zamboanga del Norte's governor justified this move by stating: "We have to protect ourselves... the military could not warrant our safety. They come late."

The following day in the nation's capital, the Director General of Philippine National Police (PNP) announced to the media that 1,000 shotguns will be shipped to Mindanao and given to "selected, screened and trained police auxiliaries" and deputised village watchmen and selected CVOs, all of whom are civilians. The PNP has pledged to provide an additional 12,000 more if this effort is successful.

In at least one instance verified by Amnesty International, armed members of a CVO prevented representatives of the Joint Monitoring and Assistance Team from reaching an affected community, claiming direct orders from the town's mayor.

"The recent violent attacks by MILF elements have of course shaken many of Mindanao's residents, who have every right to demand greater protection," said Sam Zarifi. "Many people in Mindanao are terrified of a return to a period when armed Muslim insurgents and Christian vigilante 'Iloga' groups attacked civilians with impunity."

Background

On 4 August the Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order against the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain by the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

The Philippine Supreme Court is scheduled to hold another hearing tomorrow, Friday 22 August.

The Memorandum of Agreement, which will create the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, would have been a breakthrough in the decade-long peace talks. The Memorandum aimed to formally open negotiations between the government of the Philippines and the MILF to end the four-decade conflict in Mindanao that has claimed the lives of an estimated 120,000 people, displaced some two million and impoverished the resource-rich region.

The Memorandum would have expanded the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The governors of affected communities in North Cotabato and Zamboanga, with large Christian populations, challenged the agreement before the Supreme Court, claiming that their right to information and participation in making decisions that affect their lives was not respected.