

5 October 2000

AI Index ASA 35/011/2000 - News Service Nr. 190

Philippines: Urgent Action

Amnesty International members are writing to the Philippine authorities on behalf of ten people, one of whom is reported to be 15 years old, who were arrested by the Philippine armed forces on 25 September, during a raid on a mosque on the island of Jolo. The army claim they are members of the armed opposition group Abu Sayyaf, who recently gained international notoriety after a series of kidnappings of local and foreign hostages. Detainees are often tortured during interrogation in the Philippines.

The soldiers reportedly recovered weapons and a grenade from a cabinet inside the mosque, in Alat. However, in an interview in the Philippine Daily Inquirer, a local religious leader has said that some of those arrested were cleaners working at the mosque, and others were homeless people sheltering there.

They are now held in Sulu Provincial Jail, in the southern Philippines. A team from the local office of the Philippine Commission on Human Rights (CHR) tried to visit them there, but the warden refused to let them in. It is not known whether the detainees have been allowed access to lawyers or their families. According to the CHR, the local police are preparing charges against them.

Background

At least 80,000 people are reported to have fled their homes in Jolo since the Philippine armed forces launched a major offensive on 16 September, reportedly deploying 4,000 air and ground troops in an attempt to rescue 19 foreign and local hostages held by the Abu Sayyaf. The Philippine Secretary of Defence, Orlando Mercado, is reported to have said that the offensive was also intended to “destroy the Abu Sayyaf” so that the government could “retain its respect and dignity”. Since the start of the military offensive, two French journalists held captive by the Abu Sayyaf have escaped and 12 Filipino preachers have been rescued. Another Filipino, who has been in captivity for more than five months, is still unaccounted for, as are three Malaysians and an American. Some 53 alleged Abu Sayyaf members have been arrested.

There have been persistent reports of human rights violations by the armed forces against the civilian population of Jolo since the beginning of the offensive. Civilians fleeing the conflict have told local journalists that the armed forces have carried out indiscriminate bombings, resulting in civilian casualties, summary executions, arbitrary arrests and “disappearances” of suspected Abu Sayyaf sympathisers. These reports are difficult to corroborate, because the armed forces control access to affected areas and all telephone lines, including mobile networks, have been cut.

The Abu Sayyaf, based in the Sulu archipelago of the southern Philippines, is believed to have several hundred armed members, some of whom profess Islamic ideologies. It has made political demands, but also engaged in criminal activities, including extortion. It has committed grave human rights abuses, including killings and hostage-takings, and is believed to have increased its support after reportedly receiving large ransom payments for the recent release of western hostages.

Amnesty International has condemned abuses by the Abu Sayyaf and has urged it to cease the practice of hostage-taking.

Amnesty International members are writing to the head of the Armed Forces of the Philippines on behalf of the following: Binajar Hussein, Alber Ulavedes, Nasser Lalil, Radzmil Salahi, Radjae Alvares, Nur Arabani, Salih Salahi, Alnasir Alih Parijal, Mobin Sappayani and Jalton Ahman. They are writing letters to

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