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Philippines: All hostages must be released immediately

Amid conflicting reports that several children have been killed and two tourists have died in the two hostage situations in the Philippines, Amnesty International appeals to the armed Islamic separatist group, Abu Sayyaf, to release all hostages held on the islands of Jolo and Basilan in the southern Philippines.

“Taking innocent civilians hostage is an appalling abuse of human rights. The actions of the Abu Sayyaf only serve to exacerbate escalating violence in the south of the country,” Amnesty International said.

The hostages include a group of Filipino schoolchildren, teachers and a priest held for more than six weeks, and 21 foreign tourists and workers abducted over a week ago from the Malaysian holiday resort island of Sipadan.

The Philippine authorities announced today that several of 22 schoolchildren abducted by the Abu Sayyaf on the island of Basilan more than six weeks ago have been rescued, following repeated military assaults on the Abu Sayyaf hideout. However concern has mounted for the safety of the remaining children, teachers and a priest, amid reports that some of the hostages have been killed. The Abu Sayyaf also claimed to have beheaded two schoolteachers in the group.

“All sides to the conflict in southern Philippines, both opposition groups and armed forces, have been responsible for violating international human rights and humanitarian law. By holding civilians hostage under threat of death, members of this armed group are committing one more brutal act in an escalating spiral of violence in the region,” the organization said.

The Abu Sayyaf has claimed that one foreign hostage held on Jolo was killed by a stray bullet and another died of a heart attack, after fighting broke out yesterday between the rebels and government troops surrounding the area. Government officials have denied the claims. The hostages have since been moved to an unknown location and their current state of health is uncertain.

A Filipino doctor who was able to visit the Jolo hostages recently recommended urgent hospitalization of at least two of them. All are reported to be weak, hungry and dehydrated, with many suffering from diarrhoea.

Foreign diplomats yesterday urged a peaceful resolution to the hostage crisis and have called on the Philippine government to avoid any military action which could harm them.

“It is imperative that all parties to the conflict - both opposition groups and the armed forces - respect international humanitarian law and basic human rights,” the organization added.

Background

Political tensions on the southern island of Mindanao and neighbouring islands, continuing since the 1970s, have heightened in recent months. Thousands of civilians have fled their homes as armed conflict has escalated.

The Abu Sayyaf is the smaller of two armed opposition groups fighting for a separate Islamic state, and has periodically engaged in kidnappings for ransom. It is believed to have several hundred members. 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 January 2000, President Estrada announced an extension until the end of June of the deadline for the conclusion of the peace talks and called for “all-out war” if they fail. However, on 1 May the MILF announced the negotiations would be suspended indefinitely and blamed the government for an escalation in military attacks.

In recent years, armed opposition groups and other vigilante groups in Mindanao have been responsible for human rights abuses, including hostage-taking and killings. The Philippine armed forces have also committed human rights violations in the context of counter-insurgency operations, including extrajudicial executions, torture, “disappearances” and indiscriminate killings of civilians.

The Philippine Government has responded to the recent escalation in violence by mobilizing a larger contingency of armed forces in the region and announcing plans to expand the number of militia groups, including the Citizen Armed Force Geographical Units (CAFGUs). Such militia groups were notorious for committing widespread human rights violations during the 1980s and early 1990s.

Amnesty International condemns abuses committed by armed opposition groups; its stand however does not imply 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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