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Philippines: Thousands suffering the impact of shattered Mindanao peace talks

The suspension of the peace talks between the government of the Philippines and insurgents in the southern island of Mindanao threatens hundreds of thousands of civilians facing escalating hostilities, said Amnesty International in a new report today.

Amnesty International representatives travelled to Mindanao during the onset of heavy fighting in August to research the conflict, where they interviewed staff from local organizations. The report highlights human rights abuses carried out since the breakdown of peace negotiations, including:

- the deaths of at least 100 civilians since August, some deliberately targeted by Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters
- some 140 men, women and children taken hostage
- almost 400,000 people living in displacement camps, having left their homes, and often crops and livestock as well, as they fled fighting. Many homes have been burnt, and possessions stolen, reportedly by both the MILF and the Philippine army.
- the activities of untrained and unaccountable civilian militias

The recent escalation in violence followed the Philippine Supreme Court's decision to block implementation of a Memorandum of Agreement between the government and the MILF in August. The agreement was part of the ongoing peace process to halt the four decade long conflict.

"The MILF and local groups opposing the peace talks have used violence as a negotiating strategy and hundreds of thousands of people are paying the price," said Donna Guest, Amnesty International's Asia Pacific deputy director.

Amnesty International spoke to a local human rights worker about the deaths of a 94-year-old man, Miguel Daitia and his son Ruben 33, reportedly killed by the MILF on 18 August: "They used a large rock to destroy the lock, and then they went in and took the men. There were three of them, including the 94 year-old. They killed them. They asked the women in the house to leave. Once they left, the MILF fighters burned the house. They burned 22 houses in that neighbourhood in Lapayan, Kauswagan town."

Amnesty International was told by local sources that, in Lanao del Norte province, security forces in pursuit of MILF fighters killed a 15 year-old farmer who took the risk of going to an area of military operations. He was about to get married and needed money for a dowry, so he could not afford to miss the harvest this year. Together with another farmer, the teenager was walking with his horse to harvest corn from his village when they came across a group of soldiers who threatened them. The other farmer ran away in panic but soldiers pursued the 15-year-old, hit him on the head and he fell into a ravine. He was later found in a ditch, his body

marked with around 30 hack wounds. His family immediately buried him and went into hiding.

“The Philippine government and the MILF must clarify to both their commanders, and to their rank-and-file forces that attacks on civilians will not be tolerated, and see that anyone suspected of carrying out such violations is removed from their position, or from a situation where abuses might happen again. Otherwise, the picture for the people of Mindanao remains bleak if they continue to be targeted,” said Donna Guest.

Background

The report ['Shattered Peace in Mindanao: The human cost of conflict in the Philippines'](#) is based on interviews conducted this summer at the peak of the recent renewed violence and ongoing monitoring of the country's human rights situation.

On 4 August 2008, the Philippine Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order on the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), a previously “initialled” document. In the days following this order, MILF fighters launched attacks against civilians in North Cotabato, Lanao del Norte and Saranggani provinces. On 14 October the Supreme Court ruled that the MOA-AD was unconstitutional. The conflict concerns the autonomy of Muslims in the southern Philippines.