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The Philippines: Displaced civilians at risk despite Mindanao ceasefire

More than 200,000 civilians in central Mindanao are still vulnerable to abuses despite the recent ceasefire between the Philippine army and the insurgent Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), warns Amnesty International in a new report published today.

The report, *Philippines: Shattered lives, beyond the 2008 – 2009 Mindanao armed conflict*, details the risks that hundreds of thousands of people face as they are forced to live in camps or makeshift shelters, sometimes surrounded by a heavy military presence. Many of the displaced are still unable to return to their homes following the implementation of a ceasefire on 29 July 2009.

“The vulnerability and uncertainty which civilians in central Mindanao face makes it imperative that the government and the MILF put human rights at the top of their agenda during future peace talks,” said Donna Guest, Amnesty International’s Asia Pacific Deputy Director.

The report, based on an Amnesty International mission to Mindanao and detailed field updates, highlights the desperate conditions of civilians living in crowded camps with limited access to food and livelihoods. The report also provides information about human rights abuses by both the army and the MILF against villagers in Maguindanao province, central Mindanao.

In one such case, during January 2009 a large group of soldiers entered Ungap village, Sultan Kudarat Municipality and arrested 10 men there. The soldiers forced their way into houses, pointing their guns and destroying villagers’ belongings. One villager told Amnesty International that the detained men, including her husband, were later given electric shocks; nine were released but her husband remains in detention. According to another family member, his interrogators questioned him over a 10 week period while administering electric shocks and beating him.

Many displaced people told Amnesty International that they were forced to risk their lives and return to their former homes to retrieve belongings and tend their crops in order to survive. Other testimonies provided details about arbitrary arrests and severe beatings of civilians at the hands of the Philippine army, the MILF, or local militias.

“Decades of conflict have inflicted scars on the civilians, who continue to live in fear, not knowing what tomorrow holds,” said Donna Guest. “The recent ceasefire agreement has raised their hopes, so the burden is now on the government and the MILF to demonstrate that they are sincere in prioritizing the well-being of the local population.”

“The government of the Philippines is obliged under international law to ensure that displaced people are

protected and have proper access to adequate food, water and medical assistance.” said Donna Guest.

Amnesty International also calls on both the Philippine authorities and the MILF to ensure the safety and well-being of all civilians. Where there are credible allegations of human rights abuses, the government should launch a swift and impartial investigation into the allegations and make the findings public. The MILF should cooperate with the government in facilitating such investigations.

The government should also implement, in cooperation with the displaced persons, a plan for the safe and voluntary return to their villages, including the provision of adequate food, housing and livelihoods upon resettlement.

Background

Conflict in Mindanao between the Philippine army and the MILF intensified in August 2008 after a temporary restraining order on the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) was issued by the Supreme Court. The document had been designed to pave the way to peace, by expanding the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. In October the Court ruled that the MOA-AD was unconstitutional. Fighting continued sporadically until a ceasefire agreement was reached in July 2009. Over 700,000 people in total were displaced during the year long conflict.

In the early 1970s a full-scale armed conflict erupted between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). In 1978 the MILF broke away from the MNLF, with which the government subsequently signed a peace agreement in 1996. Fighting broke out intermittently between the army and the MILF, as attempts at peace negotiations also continued. On 29 July 2009 in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, the Philippine government and the MILF agreed to suspend military operations and work to establish a protection mechanism for civilians. Further talks between the two parties have yet to resume.