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Philippines: Human rights must be respected to secure peace and stability in southern Philippines

With military operations against Abu Sayyaf units responsible for hostage-taking set to intensify in the southern Philippines, Amnesty International today drew attention to reports of hidden abuses and called on the Philippine authorities to ensure strict respect for international human rights and humanitarian law.

"The need for watchfulness has intensified" Amnesty International said, "Safeguards critical to upholding human rights protection – proved weak elsewhere in the Philippines – have come under particular pressure in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago."

Despite legal safeguards in place since the ouster of former President Marcos in 1986, Philippine military operations against Muslim secessionist groups and kidnap gangs in Mindanao have been accompanied by persistent reports of human rights violations. These include both indiscriminate bombardment of civilian areas leading to mass displacements, and the killing and "disappearance" of suspected Abu Sayyaf members and their alleged sympathisers. Arbitrary arrests have been accompanied by recent reports of torture, as military and paramilitary personnel have sought to extract information about Abu Sayyaf and the location of their hostages.

As part of a recently initiated six-month joint military training exercise, Philippine troops undertaking combat operations against Abu Sayyaf units are to receive logistical support and intelligence assistance from over 650 US soldiers, including some 160 Special Forces personnel.

Amnesty International urges that as US forces supply arms, training and other support, all possible steps are taken to reinforce and uphold human rights safeguards.

"Though largely hidden in a context of armed conflict, communal tension, violent crime and kidnapping, reports of torture and other human rights violations persist. The US should ensure that its training, supplies and support are not used to further violate human rights."

"Amnesty International once again condemns the abuses committed by Abu Sayyaf and calls for the immediate release of all hostages, but reiterates its belief that peace and security can only be restored and sustained in Mindanao if human rights are respected by all."

Background

In May 2001 members of Abu Sayyaf, a loosely-organised Muslim separatist armed group involved primarily in kidnapping for ransom, seized 17 Filipinos and three US citizens from a tourist resort in Palawan and transported them to Basilan island. Military operations on Basilan continued as, amid further kidnappings, ransom payments and periodic releases, at least 13 hostages were murdered. By February 2002 two US citizens and a Filipina remained in captivity. The kidnappings followed a series of abductions during 2000, including over 20 school children on Basilan and 21 foreign tourists and workers seized from a resort in Sabah (Malaysia). In September 2000 military units launched assaults on Abu Sayyaf positions on Jolo island and at least 80,000 civilians were reported to have fled their homes to escape armed clashes and apparently indiscriminate bombardments.

The activities of Abu Sayyaf are set within a wider historical conflict in Mindanao. Muslim calls for secession intensified after centuries

of resistance by local indigenous Muslim communities to the forcible assertion of Spanish and American colonial power, and to the subsequent authority of the independent, Christian-majority, Philippine state. Fuelled by resentment at ethnic marginalisation and poverty, intense fighting between the largest Muslim armed group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and government forces broke out in the 1970s. Intermittent cease-fires led eventually to a peace agreement and the creation of a four province Muslim autonomous region in 1996.

The other major Muslim armed group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), refused to take part in the 1996 agreement, and in 2000 former President Joseph Estrada launched a major offensive against MILF bases and communities in central Mindanao. Over 400,000 civilians were displaced amid reports of indiscriminate bombings and human rights violations.

On assuming office in January 2001, President Gloria Arroyo revived peace negotiations with the MILF. Talks held in Libya and Malaysia led to the signing of a cease-fire in August 2001. Despite periodic cease-fire violations, substantive negotiations on the scope of a formal peace agreement continue.

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