

Evacuees Face Growing Hunger and Anxiety

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As clashes in southern Philippines continue, refugees stuck in camps lack food, water and psychological support.

Living conditions are worsening for villagers who have sought shelter from renewed fighting between Muslim separatist rebels and government forces, now in its sixth week.

Many are short of food, while others are battling post-traumatic stress, as the conflict between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, MILF, and the Armed Forces of the Philippines, AFP, grinds on in the south of the country.

The fighting that has displaced more than 100,000 civilians in North Cotabato province in the Mindanao region since July 27 has now reportedly shifted south to the province of Maguindanao, where the military has been launching air and ground assaults against MILF commander Ombra Kato and his forces.

Following this development, officials and health workers have been trying to convince those refugees from North Cotabato to return home, but to no avail.

“Fear and anxiety are hounding many evacuees and they need psychological help,” said North Cotabato governor Jesus Saccalan.

Father Eduardo Vasquez of the Catholic Church’s inter-religious dialogue in Pikit, North Cotabato, said at least 10,000 individuals remain in evacuation sites in the villages of the municipality. People of all faiths have been affected, he said.

Although the evacuees are being looked after by Vasquez’s team of 10 volunteers, food supplies are dwindling. The International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC, has already announced it needs to find additional 184.5 million Philippine pesos, PhP, of humanitarian aid to help those affected by the conflict.

“Their immediate need and urgent concern is food,” said Vasquez, an Oblate missionary priest, dedicated to serving the poor and marginalised.

“It is dangerous if they have nothing to eat since they might end up raiding other homes just to try and feed their families.”

Vasquez and his team have found themselves looking after refugees in the surrounding towns – not just those who fled to Pikit.

“Muslim evacuees will not return home unless they are sure their villages are free from armed men, be it government soldiers or Moro rebels,” said Vasquez.

Civilians in North Cotabato province say their villages are still not safe.

Just outside Barangay Baliki village, a 15-minute ride over rough roads from the town of Midsayap in North Cotabato, nine families are living in makeshift homes. The village itself is already a virtual ghost town, with only a few armed residents left. They point out positions two kilometres away where they say MILF snipers are hidden.

“They fire one or two shots a day to send the message they are still there,” Alberto, an armed civilian volunteer, told the Philippine Human Rights Reporting Project.

“While our families stay in the main town of Midsayap we must stay here to guard our crops.”

At a nearby crossroad, a billboard with huge photos of North Cotabato Representative Lala Santos-Mendoza and President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo promotes a new road project.

“They would both be full of holes if the rebels had them in their sights,” joked Alberto, as he pointed out the damage caused elsewhere by the snipers.

The conflict in the south of the country shows little sign of ending any time soon.

President Arroyo reportedly ordered a suspension of air attacks in Central Mindanao on September 11 and appealed to both groups to end hostilities. However, AFP chief of staff General Alexander Yano denied that there were any such orders.

Locals are concerned that although the government has reportedly suspended air attacks on MILF camps in the Cotabato-Maguindanao-Lanao areas, the military is pursuing its campaign to track down Commander Kato, who the authorities say is responsible for killing more than 30 civilians during a series of attacks in North Cotabato in August.

According to reports, several young children were killed last week during military air strikes. They died when the boat they were travelling in was attacked by air force helicopter gun-ships.

Photographs of the dead children have been widely circulated and local villagers say there was no fighting of any kind when the boat they were in was attacked, along with several others also carrying civilians.

But the military have denied they deliberately targeted the group saying that fighting was ongoing at the time.

Colonel Julieta Ando, spokesperson for the AFP’s 6th infantry division, is adamant that the military action against the MILF group will continue.

The AFP claims to have video evidence of the MILF using child soldiers.

“These lawless MILF groups should refrain from using civilians as shields and also avoid using child soldiers. Their casualties in North Cotabato include children who are 15 to 16 years old,” said Ando.

Meanwhile, around 400 Moro families from the mainly Christian towns of Aleosan, Pikit and Midsayap in North Cotabato have moved south of the river to set up camp in Datu Piang town square in Maguindanao, according to town spokesperson Musib Tan.

Many have been evacuated for a second time, having only recently returned home before they were once again forced to flee by the new outbreak of fighting in early September.

“Our situation here is so hard, especially this fasting month [of Ramadan],” said Babay Ali, a 40-year-old mother of four.

“We are living in a makeshift tarpaulin-made tent which is so hot in day time and so cold at night.”

Difficult as conditions may be, Ali said she would rather stay in the town square than risk her family’s safety by returning home.

“We are afraid to go home because five civilians were killed in crossfire between the army and the MILF,” said Ali, as she prepared lunch for her two children who are excused from fasting. “Those killed were our neighbours in the evacuation centre.”

“When can we return home and rebuild our lives?” Ali asked herself out loud. “Nobody knows.”

Although fighting now seems to have eased, many fear that renewed clashes will erupt after Ramadan, which ends in the first week of October.

When asked why she thought fighting had come to her village, Ali was quick to blame the government in Manila. “Because President Arroyo did not give the MILF what it wants,” she said.

She added that most of evacuees in the town square were women and children, because the males were out fighting. However, she refused to elaborate on this.

A middle-aged woman interrupted to say the men were all out looking for food. “For our Iftar,” she added, referring to the evening meal which breaks day-time fasting during Ramadan.

Some of the refugees are reportedly showing signs of post-traumatic stress syndrome, as a result of the conflict.

Susan Campano, 39, a mother of four, said her sister was traumatised when Moro rebels raided her village in Cotabato at the end of July. Her family and neighbours were awakened by MILF guerillas roaming around

their home, she said.

“[Now] in the middle of the night, [my sister] sometimes yells out telling everybody to run as the gunmen are coming,” she said.

Campano’s husband, Gerry, a rice farmer who works in rented fields, said the rebels ordered them all to leave.

“We had no choice [but to go],” he said.

After the government forces drove away the MILF to the borders of North Cotabato and Maguindanao provinces in mid-August, Gerry said they returned home to find their houses burned down.

“Who did it, we don’t know for certain – the rebels maybe, the soldiers maybe – we really do not know,” said Gerry, clutching his three-year-old son amid the searing heat. The two sat under a tarpaulin shelter – now a common sight across the countryside here.

Humanitarian workers in the region say the chief problem facing evacuees is a dwindling supply of food, such as sardines, noodles, milk, sugar and coffee.

Puasa Enok, a social worker in Maguindanao, added that people desperately need non-food supplies, like tarpaulins, soaps, cooking utensils and plastic containers for drinking water.

Officials from the region’s health department have three main concerns – the inadequate help available for evacuees’ physical and mental well-being; a lack of physical security of those people trying to help them; and the fact that many internally displaced persons are still moving around.

The independent body the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines has said that evacuation centres in the region are lacking basic services due to the risks facing social workers and volunteers.

As well as food, the centres are without potable water, toilet facilities and rooms. Evacuees don’t get enough medical services and no psychosocial services are available, said a CHR report.

Six weeks on from the outbreak of fighting, a team of health workers and psychologists from the department of health in Manila are finally due to arrive in the area this week.

Officials in the region say that fighting has also seriously affected local education: most schools are used as evacuation centres. The education department of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, ARMM, currently reports that 195 schools in 24 school districts have effectively been shut down, affecting over 80,000 children.

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