

Life Goes On for Cotabato Displaced

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Many refugees too scared to return home try to make a living inside camps.

As the fear of further conflict hangs over the southern Philippines, some displaced civilians are trying to carry on as normal, despite being stuck in crowded evacuation centres.

Intensifying clashes between Muslim separatist rebels the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, MILF, and government troops earlier this month caused hundreds of thousands of people to become displaced in the south of the country.

Yet many refugees living in centres in Pikit municipality in North Cotabato Province, Mindanao, are putting their skills to good use and filling in the long empty days by working as they wait for the security situation to improve.

At the Pikit Parish Gym Evacuation Centre, 42 year-old Dulce Santander sells charcoal-grilled bananas. She says this keeps her occupied and earns her some much needed funds, while offering something different to people in the camp currently living on a basic and unvaried diet of rations.

“It's difficult to just eat the same things day after day,” she said, pointing to the tinned sardines and noodles that have been the staple diet of the thousands of people who fled here recently after MILF forces overran their villages, and proceeded to engage in fierce fighting with the Philippine army.

“By selling barbequed bananas, at least I can buy fresh fish for my family,” she added, noting that she makes about 500 Philippines pesos, PhP, (11 US dollars) a day.

She offers her customers and fellow refugees a choice of banana that is simply grilled or coated in margarine and sugar.

Government sources say the largest displacement of civilians took place in North Cotabato, where more than 130,000 people fled their homes a few days after the long-running conflict erupted again.

MILF forces launched attacks on villages in the area following a decision by the Supreme Court on August 4 to suspend a draft peace agreement that was intended to bring an end to the militia's 40-year battle for a separate Islamic state on the southern island of Mindanao.

According to the ICRC's head of delegation in Manila, Felipe Donoso, while many in the province have now returned to their villages, some 50,000 remain in evacuation centres fearful of renewed violence.

Here in the Pikit parish gym, hundreds of families have sought refuge from the villages of Kolambog, Silik and New Valencia in Pikit, as well as from neighbouring Tapodoc in Aleosan municipality, also in North Cotabato.

In the camp, another refugee was similarly trying to make the best of the difficult situation by offering her services as a beautician.

Mila Grace Nabos, 33, from Barangay Tapodoc, continues to practice her day job, despite being surrounded by people young and old who are left with little to do except doze on cardboard boxes amid the flies and the heat.

“Nail service is only PHP 30 (70 cents),” Nabos sang out to one potential customer while tending to the cuticles of another.

Nabos explained how she would be earning more had she not been displaced and had her livelihood disrupted.

ICRC representative Juan Fuertes said that one of the humanitarian group's initiatives, alongside providing emergency assistance to evacuees, is supporting livelihood projects in conflict-affected areas on the island.

“We started [the project] a year ago in some areas in eastern and central Mindanao. We provided beneficiaries with carabaos (cattle), horses, goats and rice, corn and vegetable seeds,” said Fuertes.

ICRC hopes to sustain the initiative, pursued with the help of the local government, as well as veterinary and agricultural workers.

“We extend this kind of assistance to those populations that are regularly displaced,” he explained.

“The idea is for the evacuees to still have access to food and farming when they return home.”

Meanwhile, as they wait for the security situation to improve, evacuees make a living and wile away the hours as best they can.

Inside another camp in a warehouse to which displaced Muslim villagers fled, a woman was selling basic supplies.

Outside, in a makeshift tent, a man was cooking tinagtag, a Muslim delicacy made from finely ground rice and sugar.

He was seemingly unperturbed by the dump trucks and bulldozers whirling and grinding up dust nearby.

“Come and get it,” he cried. “Five pesos (11 cents) only.”

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