



Peace Monitor

ALTERNATE FORUM FOR RESEARCH IN MINDANAO, INC.

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Displaced homes, displaced dreams

The protracted armed conflict in Mindanao that has escalated due to the aborted signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) in August 2008 has displaced more than 700,000 Mindanaoans (NDCC, 2009), the biggest among the recorded displacement in the world in 2008. The continuing displacement in the first quarter of 2009 was primarily due to the Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) intensified punitive actions against the so-called rogue Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) groups who were allegedly responsible for the heightening of the armed conflict in Mindanao.

The resumption of peace talks has been indefinite despite government's pronouncements that a comprehensive peace pact shall be signed before President Gloria Arroyo's term ends in 2010. In spite of the peace talks' impasse and the volatile situation in areas affected by conflict, concerned civil society organizations (CSO) and local government units (LGUs) are conducting collaborative peacebuilding initiatives on the ground. Such efforts are geared toward initiating relief and rehabilitation programs for the internally displaced persons' (IDPs), better coverage of IDP situation through a CSO-media dialogue and building peace constituency through community dialogues and consultations.

MINDANAO CONFLICT IN FIGURES

New IDPs: 703, 949 from August 2008 to May 2009

Areas affected by armed conflict: 406 barangays from Regions X, XII & ARMM

Cost of humanitarian assistance:
PhP 320,406, 593.18

Cost of damage to properties:
PhP 251,590, 992.08

Source: NDCC (2009)



The IDPs' plight

Biggest new displacement in the world in 2008

According to the Norwegian Refugee Council's report, records on internal displacement worldwide remain high. These indicate the failure of international efforts on reducing the scale of displacements due to conflict. By the end of 2008, 4.6 million people were added to the number IDPs worldwide. Of this number, the Philippines ranked one with an estimated 600,000 new IDPs as of December 2008, followed by Sudan with 550,000 and Kenya with 500,000 (IDMC, 2009a).

The Philippines has also indicated the lowest percentage of return movements with only less than half of the total number of IDPs returning to their homes at the end of a conflict. More than half of the IDP population still seek refuge either at the evacuation areas or at their relatives and friends. Many refuse to go home due to the recurring armed encounters in their villages and the AFP's indiscriminate mortar and artillery shelling in their pursuit against renegade MILF groups.

Data show that internal displacements in Mindanao has continued in the first quarter of 2009 as the cumulative IDP count reached 703, 949 indicating that another 103, 949 IDPs were added as of 17 May (NDCC, 2009).

Lives lost, properties ravaged to the ground

As of May 2009, reported damages to properties both in infrastructure and agriculture have amounted to Php 251 million. More than half of this was inflicted on agriculture particularly on fisheries, crops and livestock. Damages on infrastructure such as roads, bridges and schools have amounted to Php 99 million (Wee, 2009). In addition to this, a total of 3,763 houses in Regions X, XII and Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) were also partially and totally damaged due to armed encounters while others were hit by the AFP's aerial bombardments (NDCC, 2009). Of the total number of damaged houses, only 28 percent or 1,039 were rehabilitated through the efforts of the civil society, international humanitarian organizations and the local government units. This has also been one of the reasons of low return movements in conflict affected areas.

Moreover, 107 people have died due to actual armed encounters while 205 died in evacuation areas due to illnesses. Most of these casualties were civilian women and children.

Table 2. Number of casualties and damaged houses (August 2008 to May 2009)

| Regions | No. of casualties during armed encounter | No. of damaged houses |
|--------------|--|-----------------------|
| X | 56 | 75 |
| XI | 25 | 1,035 |
| ARMM | 26 | 2,653 |
| Total | 107 | 3,763 |

Source: NDCC (2009)

Relief goods blocked

The checkpoints operated by the AFP on the way to the Datu Piang evacuation areas in Maguindanao allegedly blocked relief goods from international humanitarian organizations in May 2009. According to the evacuees, food rations have become fewer and far in between due to the AFP's restrictions. Some families have not received any food ration for more than three months considering that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and United Nations World Food Programme (UNWFP) distribution schedule was supposedly every six weeks and once a month respectively (Mindanews, 2009). Most evacuees have been dependent on food rations for nearly a year now. With their farms turned into battlefields, they had no choice but to leave their farms and secure their families in the evacuation areas (AHRC, 2009).

AFP checkpoints at Barangay Macasampen, Guindulungan town in Maguindanao has also reportedly blocked non-governmental and humanitarian organizations such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)- Act for Peace, United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) from entering the evacuation centers (Luwaran, 2009a).



AFP restrictions affected the displaced families in Maguindanao.

AFP's 6th Infantry Division spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Ponce allegedly said that the restrictions were part of the security measures being implemented amidst ongoing war. He reportedly added that clearing the area was necessary since the AFP was usually held responsible for any untoward incidents within their area of responsibility.

However, as argued by humanitarian organizations and human rights advocates, blocking the entry of humanitarian aid, especially food relief was a violation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (UNGPID), in which the Philippine government is a signatory.

Section 10 and 25 of the UNGPID state that IDPs "shall be protected in particular against starvation as a form of combat" and that concerned authorities "shall grant and facilitate the free passage of humanitarian assistance and grant persons engaged in the provision of such assistance rapid and unhampered access" to the IDPs.

Principle 18 also emphasizes that "all IDPs have the right to an adequate standard of living" that "regardless of circumstances and without discrimination, competent authorities shall provide internally displaced persons with and ensure safe access to essential food and potable water" and as well as other basic needs like medical and sanitation services (Amnesty International, 2008).

Atty. Christina Haw Tay-Jovero of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR)- Cotabato City, affirmed that groups or organizations providing relief and rehabilitation programs to evacuees were not obliged to ask for permission from the AFP, particularly in entering evacuation areas. They just need to coordinate with them.

Alleged illegal trading and diverting of relief goods

Another reason of the food ration restrictions according to the AFP was the alleged selling of relief items by the IDPs. In Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao, the AFP has confiscated 11 metric tons of UNWFP rice ready for delivery to private rice traders. According to WFP Country Director Stephen Anderson, rice traders were taking advantage of the IDPs' need of cash to buy other necessities. This poses another challenge to humanitarian aid workers (IRIN, 2009).

According to the AFP, suspected supporters of the three rogue MILF commanders were also caught in the act of smuggling relief goods from evacuation areas at Barangays Dapiawan and Pagatin of Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao. Further, they also recovered some ICRC



Families while waiting for their share of the ICRC relief goods.

medical supplies in the overrun MILF satellite camps at Barangay Butilen in Datu Piang and Barangays Pimbakalan, Penditin and Dasikil in Mamasapano, Maguindanao (AFP, 2009). On one hand, the Philippine government has released a statement encouraging aid organizations to reduce amount of food rations to evacuees to avoid passing on some of the supply to the renegade MILF groups (IDMC, 2009b).

This situation added to the evacuees' problem on inadequate food and medical supplies. In Maguindanao alone, of the 50,333 evacuees, only 31 percent or 15, 522 were able to receive assistance on food and other basic necessities, excluding some civilians who were trapped in communities in Datu Piang, Maguindanao and were cut off from any outside help (AHRC, 2009). Further, the AFP's restrictions on the entry of humanitarian organizations has also contributed to this problem because most of the evacuees solely rely on food rations for their daily subsistence.

IDPs tagged as MILF 'reserve forces'

In a media forum held in Cotabato City in June, an AFP spokesperson reportedly said that IDPs are 'enemy reserve forces' and that the relief goods for the IDPs were passed onto the MILF. He added that although not all IDPs were part of the lawless MILF group, some of them posed as members and said to have been staying at the evacuation areas during night time. These statements gained various reactions from the media, civil society and GRP-MILF peace panels.

AFP has also added the following 'evidences' to boost their claim: 1) the rogue MILF groups' terroristic activities like bombings usually happen near IDP camps; 2) the suspects responsible for attacking the 54th IB personnel at Butilen Bridge, Datu Piang, Maguindanao on 01 March 2009 merged with the IDPs; and 3) MILF reinforcements during their attack against the security forces in Barangay Malingao, Shariff Aguak during President Gloria M. Arroyo's visit in March just came from nearby IDP centers (AFP, 2009).

The AFP also questioned the disparity in the number of IDPs before and during relief goods distribution particularly in Guindulungan, Mamasapano, Maguindanao. IDP centers were only occupied during relief goods distribution but “IDPs were nowhere to be found” after having the relief items.

In response, Maguindanao administrator Engineer Norie Unas told Manila and Mindanao-based journalists in a forum that it must not be surprising if some relief items could be found in MILF camps. Maguindanao has been the hometown of the MILF members, and some MILF camps were also the communities where families and relatives of MILF members reside.

Atty. Datu Michael Mastura, senior peace panel member of the MILF said that this statement of the AFP implied that it has lumped together the non-combatant civilians with the MILF-Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, and thus “there is a collective punishment”. Mastura added that the MILF cannot tolerate such act of the AFP. He stressed that it was “supposed to promote the higher interest of the State, the national interest”, but what happened on the ground was contradictory. Civilians seemed to be included as the AFP’s target in its pursuit operations .

Contradictory to the AFP’s view, GRP peace panel head Rafael Seguis claimed that the government is still deeply concerned with the situation of the IDPs especially in assisting them with their needs. He expressed that the AFP’s claim does not reflect the views of the GRP. Moreover, government peace panel spokesperson, Atty. Camilo Montessa allegedly stated that the AFP’s statement was ‘not the official government line’ and that ‘the IDPs can never be part of the enemy’.

“All wars are wars against children”

Beyond the devastating effects on people’s livelihood and properties, children considerably bear the brunt of the armed conflict. Unimagined situations have left traumatic experiences among them- bomb explosions, burning of houses, raiding farms and robbing off harvests, massacres, separation with and/or murder of parents and siblings, among others. These situations which became natural occurrences for children in conflict situations will have effects in their total human development due to physical and emotional violence. These will manifest as high level of fear, anxiety, aggressiveness and insecurity in the lives of the children (UNICEF, 1996).

Relief and rehabilitation programs might have been able to provide for the children’s basic physical needs, but not so much with the emotional and psychological aspects in terms of coping up with the experiences they have gone through.

This has been alarming since more than half of the evacuees were children, particularly in Maguindanao province where the biggest IDP count recorded were children. As stressed by Yul Olaya of the Bantay Ceasefire, a local monitoring team that have been coordinating with the Joint Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (JCCCH) of the GRP and the MILF, “all wars are wars against children”.

Data showed that an estimated 20 million children worldwide have been displaced due to conflict and human rights violations wherein more than two million of them have died during actual encounters and at least six million have been permanently disabled or seriously injured (UNICEF, 2007).

Fr. Eduardo Vasquez, OMI, a parish priest of a Catholic Church in Datu Piang, Maguindanao revealed that based on the records of the Municipal Disaster Coordinating Council, 30 children have already died from August 2008 to June 2009 mostly due to severe dehydration and pneumonia, while others were accidentally hit by bombs (Arguillas, 2009a). Another 101 evacuees (59 of them were children) were still undergoing treatment at the Notre Dame of Dulawan clinic and *Bahay Kalinga* (a clinic put up by Fr. Vasquez for the IDPs). Most of the children suffer from diarrhea, typhoid fever, cough, pneumonia and other diseases while four women had suffered from miscarriages due to “poor sanitation, lack of access to potable water, lack of food and radiation from bomb explosions” (Arguillas, 2009b).

The protracted armed conflict in Mindanao does not only hamper the victims access to enough food, water and other basic needs, but more so with the children’s education. In Datu Piang alone, 6,000 students or 59 percent of the total number of school-aged children



Kids bear the brunt in any armed conflict.

had stopped schooling for the academic year 2009-2010. Having been recurrently displaced and dependent on food rations for daily subsistence, a number of families chose not to send their children to school in the meantime.

The formal school environment is also not conducive for learning. In Datu Gumbay Piang Central Elementary School (DGPCES) for instance, classrooms became congested because two classes were held simultaneously in one room, just merely separated by a blackboard. Aside from the fact that makeshift tents of the evacuees stood inside the school premises, DGPCES also housed children from ten other nearby schools who vacated from their conflict-ridden villages.

Despite this, the teachers, who are IDPs themselves, continued to hold classes as they did not want their students to lag behind their lessons. Teachers also admitted that students can hardly concentrate in their classes because they suffer from effects of congestion and unwanted noise caused by the AFP's mortar and artillery shelling in nearby communities. Oftentimes because of fear, some students have experienced peeing in their pants. Others would go out of the classroom and go back to their parents in the evacuation areas just steps away from their classrooms.

Human rights gravely violated

Various cases of human rights violations have been reported in areas affected by conflict. In DGPCES and GLACI school, evacuees have experienced abductions, summary executions and illegal arrests (Ambolodto, 2009).

On May 2009, three innocent civilians waiting for ICRC and WFP rations were illegally arrested by the AFP at the village of Pagatin, Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao province. More civilians became victims of the AFP's indiscriminate firing. On 15 June, three evacuees at Maahad Evacuation Center, Datu Piang, Maguindanao were also hit by the AFP's artillery shelling.

Most of these violations were seldom reported to authorities due to fear and lack of trust to the country's justice system. Sammy Maulana of the Consortium of

Bangsamoro Civil Society has revealed that some local officials have actually facilitated amicable settlements of some of the filed human rights cases. The evacuees also lamented that the present scenario clearly showed that the lives of Moro civilians have been reduced to merely collateral damage of war.

Transforming visions of peace into concrete, doable actions

The deadlock of the peace talks and the alarming number of IDPs have strengthened peace and development workers' struggle to work for a peaceful Mindanao. Various forms of peace efforts have been conducted in different parts of Mindanao such as walk for peace, peace dialogues and consultations, not only among the adult populations but moreso with the youth.

In an effort to raise children's awareness on their rights and how to protect these rights especially in conflict situations, a five-day peace camp participated in by around 100 primary and secondary students was held at Balindog, Kidapawan City in May (Mapanao, 2009).

Another four-day interfaith youth camp aimed to build friendship and camaraderie as a way to remove historical barriers that brought prejudices and biases was conducted. Around 100 Muslim and Christian youth coming from the conflict-affected areas of the Lanao provinces and the cities of Iligan and Marawi attended the activity.

A walk for peace was also initiated by a 53-year-old French Canadian named Jean Beliveau, together with local mountaineers and hikers. This is to promote peace and inspire others to "transform the culture of war and violence into a culture of peace and non-violence" (Gallardo, 2009)

Mindanaoan's unified call to absolutely stop the war, not only as temporary such as ceasefire, has been far beyond reach. In reality, war has persisted through decades because of underlying politics where some people continue to benefit from it. Apart from the desperate living conditions of people in conflict-affected areas in Mindanao, industries involved in the manufacturing and trading of armaments have flourished. War, indeed has become a profitable business for some.

Government's sincerity and political will in truly solving the Mindanao problem has also been constantly questioned. If the government has truly been sincere in looking into the roots of the conflict instead of using its military power in resolving the Bangsamoro people's struggle, then the current peace process would have been gaining the fruits of its labor.

This quarter, President Arroyo has again announced the resumption of peace talks before 2009 ends and before she steps out of office in 2010. With less than six months left, the said target seemed to be unattainable. The immediate and more doable thing is to pull out and reposition the AFP battalions deployed in conflict areas so that the IDPs could return to their homes and rebuild their lives. Reactivating the CCCH and the Local Monitoring Team (LMT) so as to prevent the escalation of conflict and occurrence of hostilities could also be more feasible.

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Peace Monitor

A monthly analyses on the updates of the peace negotiations between the GRP and the MILF. It also contains issues involving efforts of the government and the civil society towards peace and development in Mindanao.

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