

Mindanao (Philippines): Paramilitary groups attack indigenous people

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Talaingod Manobos: Indigenous people seek peace after attacks

Davao Del Norte, Philippines - Up on the verdant mountains of Talaingod, a young pig squeals as four men grab its legs and a freshly sharpened bolo readies to slash its throat.

Dahosay Ansam-on, 77, utters a prayer to the Magbabaya, or the “supreme being” in Ata Manobo language. As they return to their homes, the villagers hope to live in peace.

It’s been a month since Ansam-on was reunited with villagers who fled when armed men threatened to set a school on fire in retaliation for the death of a relative killed by communist rebels from the New People’s Army (NPA).

Vivien Pepito, one of the school’s teachers, could not forget her ordeal on the night of July 6, when those men knocked violently at the door of a staff house where she and her family lives.

“They wanted to get in,” she told Al Jazeera. “I cried for help so the villagers could come to our rescue.”

Communist threat

Bringing spears and arrows, villagers drove away the men. Locals call them Alamara, a paramilitary group with alleged ties to the Philippine military blamed for attacking tribal communities in Talaingod and other towns in the province of Davao del Norte in the southern Philippines, according to Human Rights Watch [*see article below*].

The next morning, villagers said the men also wanted to kill Pepito and her husband, Jessie, who teaches at the same school. Over the next few days, the community, many of them parents of Pepito’s pupils, guarded the teachers and the school. Eventually, many decided to flee the village.

The Alamara men accuse Pepito and other teachers of being members of the NPA, alleging the school also promotes the group’s communist ideology to pupils.

In the same month, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte made a formidable threat: that he would bomb community schools that sympathised with communist fighters. He alleged these schools operate without government permits.

Soon after, the Philippine military accused Pepito's school, Salugpongan, of serving as a front for the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the NPA, local media reported.

Months later in September, one of the school's pupils, Obillo Bay-ao, was shot allegedly by the same men who harassed Pepito and the other teachers.

As tensions rose, villagers fled and sought shelter in Davao City, where a Protestant church assists indigenous peoples caught in fighting between government troops and leftist fighters.

An estimated 3,000 indigenous people fled starting in 2014 because of attacks by militiamen.

Located in Sitio Dulyan in the town of Talaingod, Salugpongan is more than 100km away from Davao City. Villagers take a 30-minute kidney-jarring trip on an off-road motorbike from the mountains down to the plains before embarking on another trip to Tagum City in Davao del Norte, eventually leading them to Davao City.

The bike trip alone costs about \$10, an amount that could go a long way if spent on food, said Pepito who has been teaching Ata Manobo children for three years now.

Pepito and her husband went to the same university where they first met. After a series of assignments as students in the community, the couple decided to volunteer as teachers here as soon as they finished their education.

"I grew up having biases against minorities. When I met these people, things changed," said Jessie.

Pushed to the margins

Salugpongan - or the Salugpongan Ta Tanu Igkanogon Community Learning Center - was established in 2003. It was created to empower the Ata Manobo people who are no strangers to turmoil.

In the early 1990s, their leaders initiated a tribal war against a logging company that wanted to enter Talaingod.

In response to rising calls to protect the minority, former President Fidel V Ramos signed into law the Indigenous People's Rights Act of 1997, which led to the creation of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, an organisation often criticised for failing to serve the people it was mandated to look after.

Mindanao was annexed into the Philippines through the 1898 Treaty of Paris even though the American colonial government, and the Spaniards, never conquered the island.

Since then, waves of migrations from the northern Philippines have pushed indigenous tribes to settle into the hinterlands as the newcomers found homes on the plains.

Which is why the Ata Manobo people, like other minorities in the Philippines, often take it on themselves when it comes to matters concerning their ancestral land. Unfortunately, when they stage protests demanding the government to protect their rights, the military calls these efforts communist "propaganda".

Maria Victoria Maglana, a development worker and human rights advocate, debunks this idea.

"The view that the Talaingod Manobos are being used is premised on the ultimately derogatory

mindset that the Lumads (indigenous people) do not know what they are doing and that they are ignorant and gullible," Maglana wrote in a newspaper column.

On that Sunday morning, children and their parents dashed towards the man with the pig's blood. They dipped their fingers into a basin and hurriedly drew red crosses on their foreheads. They say the blood will protect the villagers from the Alamara and the military, and that they will no longer come back.

"When they're here our lives are only put into trouble," Pepito says.

Hours later, back in the lush mountains of Talaingod, the sacrifice is turned into a feast. People plucked banana leaves and took turns in shoving food onto their makeshift plates.

For now, says Pepito, as long as the troops and Alamara militiamen are far from the school, the villagers can live in peace.

Mick Basa

* AL JAZEERA NEWS. 19 Dec 2017:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/philippines-indigenous-people-seek-peace-attacks-171218192241109.html>

Philippines: Paramilitaries Attack Tribal Villages, Schools

Military Supporting Abusive Forces in Mindanao.

(Manila) – The Philippine military has repeatedly stood aside while paramilitary forces have attacked indigenous villages and schools in the southern region of Mindanao, Human Rights Watch said today. These forces have committed killings, torture, forced displacement, and harassment of residents, students, and educators with impunity.

The Philippine government should urgently act to end these abuses and investigate alleged complicity by military personnel, Human Rights Watch said.

"Paramilitaries in Mindanao have been terrorizing tribal people while the military at best does nothing," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director. "The Aquino administration should not only be cracking down on the paramilitaries, but also on the military officers supporting them."

Residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch and government officials have linked military personnel to the two paramilitary groups involved in the attacks. Surigao del Sur's governor, Johnny Pimentel, publicly accused the military of creating and controlling the Magahat Bagani Force (the "Magahat") paramilitary group. "The military created a monster," Pimentel told reporters on September 6, 2015.

Human Rights Watch received reports that elements of the military were consistently nearby when the Alamara group carried out attacks in Davao del Norte. In some instances, the troops accompanied paramilitaries as they harassed students and teachers of a tribal school in the town of Talaingod. "The soldiers stayed outside the classrooms but allowed the Alamara to go inside, fully

armed, accusing us of being supporters of the NPA [the communist New People's Army]," said one student, referring to an incident in March.

Tribal and environmental groups have accused the military of using these paramilitaries, who are tribal members and thus familiar to local residents, to help clear ancestral areas to pave the way for mining companies and other business interests. The government has designated the Caraga region, which includes Surigao del Sur, as the "mining capital of the Philippines." Davao del Norte and Bukidnon are also known for rich mineral and natural resources that indigenous peoples claim as their ancestral domain.

On September 1, the Magahat paramilitary group allegedly attacked a tribal school in Surigao del Sur province, torturing and killing an educator and two tribal leaders. The attack caused an estimated 4,000 residents to flee their homes, mostly to an evacuation camp in Tandag City, the capital of Surigao del Sur.

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Deputy Asia director

A paramilitary group called the Alamara has since 2014 committed violence against villages of indigenous peoples in the provinces of Bukidnon and Davao del Norte. The group has particularly harassed students at tribal schools run by religious and nongovernmental groups, claiming that these schools are used to indoctrinate tribal children in communist ideology. School administrators respond that the government-accredited schools teach approved subjects attuned to the tribe's culture.

These attacks have resulted in the closure of some schools and the disruption of classes. Hundreds of residents fled their villages and sought refuge at a Protestant church compound in Davao City, where children hold classes under trees and tents.

Save Our Schools Network, a Manila-based advocacy group, lists 52 attacks on schools in four Mindanao provinces from 2014 to mid-2015 by combined paramilitary and military forces. While paramilitaries have attacked public schools, most of their targets are tribal schools in far-flung villages where the NPA is also present. The Philippine government should join the Safe Schools Declaration, which was opened for endorsement in May in Oslo, Norway, and outlines concrete measures that all governments can take to better protect students, teachers, and schools from attack, Human Rights Watch said.

The Philippine armed forces has denied allegations of direct or indirect involvement in the paramilitary attacks. It has instead accused the NPA and alleged supporters of spreading what military officials call "black propaganda." At a September 15 news conference inside the armed forces headquarters in Manila, three tribal leaders denied the military's involvement in the violence, and accused the NPA of instigating it. However, Pimentel and other tribal groups said that two of the three leaders at the news conference were actually leaders of the Magahat and the Alamara.

"The armed forces is not involved in these alleged abuses. What is happening is a tribal war," Maj. Gen. Cesar Lactao, chief of the 4th Infantry Division, told Human Rights Watch, noting that the Magahat and the Alamara as well as the victims themselves were all from tribal communities. He asserted that the allegations were just "propaganda" by the military's enemies.

Lactao announced on September 17 the formation of a task force to pursue action against the paramilitaries. The police earlier recommended charges against 23 alleged members of the Magahat, including three of its leaders, but no arrests have been made. The official Commission on Human Rights announced that it will conduct an inquiry into the alleged abuses.

“The military’s claims of ‘tribal war’ and denials of complicity fall flat when soldiers do nothing to stop grievous crimes happening right nearby them,” Robertson said. “President Aquino should immediately order the Justice Department to conduct an impartial and credible investigation into these attacks, and prosecute those responsible.”

Paramilitary Abuses Against Tribal People in Mindanao

In a September 16 report, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which visited Surigao del Sur and Bukidnon, concluded that “paramilitary groups known to be supported by the military are the main cause of the human rights violations against these IP [indigenous peoples] communities and the cause of their displacement.” The UN special experts on the rights of indigenous peoples and on human rights defenders, in a statement on September 22, said the “military occupation of civilian institutions and killing of civilians, particularly in places such as schools, which should remain safe havens for children from this type of violence, are unacceptable, deplorable and contrary to international human rights and international humanitarian standards.”

On September 1, dozens of armed members of the Magahat Bagani Force paramilitary group allegedly conducted a pre-dawn attack on the Alternative Learning Center for Agricultural and Livelihood Development (Alcadev) tribal school in Han-ayan, in the town of Lianga, Surigao del Sur province. Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that the gunmen broke down the dormitory doors and herded students, teachers, and staff at gunpoint to the school grounds, where dozens of local residents huddled together.

The Magahat, which includes some leaders and members of the Manobo tribe as well as former NPA rebels, shot Dionel Campos, the chairman of Mapasu, the tribal group that helps run the province’s tribal schools, in the head in front of more than 200 children and local residents.

“They dragged Uncle Dionel out, pushed him to the ground, and shot him in the head,” one student told Human Rights Watch. “I saw his brains splatter out from the back of his head.” Witnesses said the armed men also killed Emerito Samarca, the executive director of Alcadev, and Juvillo Sinzo, a leader of a neighboring tribe who was in the village for family reasons.

A day before the attack, Philippines army soldiers from the 36th Infantry Battalion and the 75th Infantry Battalion arrived at the school and talked to some locals. They encamped 50 to 100 meters from the campus. When the attack occurred, none of the soldiers left their encampment to intervene, nor did they inspect the school and the village afterward, witnesses and officials said.

“It would have been impossible for them [the soldiers] not to know what was happening or at least hear the gunfire that early morning,” a village official said. “They knew the Magahat was in the area. We’ve seen soldiers and members of the Magahat in the past patrolling together or staying together in military outposts.”

Witnesses said Loloy Tejero, a Magahat member who led the attack on the Alcadev school, told the terrified crowd that their refusal to allow mining into their area was the reason for the attack. “If you only listened to us, if you only agreed to mining, this won’t happen,” a teacher quoted Tejero as shouting before killing Campos.

Father Raymond Ambray, parish priest of the town of Lingig, Surigao del Sur, who is doing post-graduate work on Alcadev schools, said that there was a “close relationship” between the army and the paramilitaries in the province, demonstrated by the Magahat’s new weapons and the army’s participation in “demonizing these indigenous peoples by accusing them of being NPA rebels.” He said that “the soldiers are seen with the Magahat all the time.” There have been attacks over the years by the Magahat on the school and community, “but no one was ever arrested for those attacks that displaced the tribe several times in the past,” he said.

In the neighboring province of Bukidnon, Alamara, the paramilitary group consisting of members of the Ata-Manobo tribe and former rebels has been implicated in numerous attacks, including nine killings in one town alone, Cabanglasan. The Alamara alleged that the victims were NPA rebels or sympathizers, which would not have justified executing people in their custody. On March 28, they killed Prenie Landasan, a shop owner. “They came to my son’s store one night, looking for him,” said Nenita Landasan, Prenie’s mother. “And when they found him inside, they shot him to death.”

On August 26, soldiers from the 8th and 23rd Infantry Battalions of the Philippine Army raided the village of White Kulaman, in Kitaotao town, Bukidnon and arrested 17 residents of the tribal village, accusing them of being NPA rebels and of running the Mindanao Interfaith School Foundation Academy on its behalf. The school was built by an Italian missionary, Father Fausto Tentorio, who was later slain. Local government and military officials had reportedly threatened to shut down the school.

In Davao del Norte province, similar attacks on schools and students have been taking place since 2012, according to the Save Our Schools Network. Ricky Balilid, 30, a teacher since 2012 at the Talaingod campus of the Mindanao Interfaith School Foundation Academy, told Human Rights Watch that soldiers would harass students and teachers. On January 5, 2015, soldiers and Alamara blocked Balilid while he was on his way to the school. “If you go through, we will chop you up and kill you,” Balilid quoted one of the Alamara as telling him. He said that soldiers and the Alamara were frequently together inside the school grounds.

Early this year, soldiers arrested a group of students on the way to get Balilid from the town center to accompany him to the school. They were released except for one student whom the military detained at their outpost for a week. The student said the soldiers tried to convince him to spy on the NPA but he refused.

Balilid said the presence of soldiers and Alamara paramilitaries had a major impact on students and teachers. Some students would not show up for days out of fear. “It takes two days of walking from the nearest town to our school,” Balilid said. “It is a very, very tough environment, so not too many teachers want to be assigned here. These soldiers and Alamara are only adding to our troubles.”

Laura, 14, a student of Misfi Academy in Kapalong town, Davao del Norte, said that soldiers and the Alamara would harass them inside their school and would accuse them of meeting with NPA rebels if they reported for school late. She said that in February Alamara members fired guns in the air as she was walking past them in their village. “They have this habit of threatening us all the time,” she said.

Dante, 13, a Grade 4 student at the Salugpungan school in Talaingod, said soldiers and paramilitaries would sleep inside their classrooms and even the teachers’ quarters, preventing them from using their kitchen. The troops would also harass them, asking them where NPA rebels were. “One time, earlier this year, the Alamara lined up all of us in class and took turns asking us about the NPA,” Dante said. “But how would we know? We were only students.”

In May, the Department of Education, allegedly on orders from the military, sought the closure of the Salugpungan and the Mindanao Interfaith School Foundation Academy schools in Davao del Norte. After families and officials objected, the department relented but suggested that the government build its own tribal schools and assign soldiers to teach. The government did not take up the proposal.

Human Rights Watch

* September 23, 2015 6:30PM EDT :

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/23/philippines-paramilitaries-attack-tribal-villages-schools>
