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## **Internal Displacement in the Philippines**

### **A USCR Site Visit Report**

**August 1997**

*The far-reaching effect of displacements in the country now glares in national statistics...*

*The pressure and trauma which displacements infuse in the affected families cannot be [over] emphasized. More so because very young children in the family become witnesses and co-sufferers of violence and its adverse consequences. For many of them, anguish, fear, and hatred become lifetime ghosts that haunt and scare their young minds.*

*Balitang Balay (Filipino NGO), May 1996*

This report was written by USCR policy analyst Hiram A. Ruiz, edited by Virginia Hamilton, and produced by Koula Papanicolas, all of the USCR staff. USCR is grateful to the many individuals and organizations that shared their time and knowledge with us, and particularly to Ms. Ester Mansos-Felix and her colleagues at Refugee Services Philippines, who greatly facilitated USCR's visit.

*(Editor's Note: A wide range of man-made and natural disasters displace people from their homes. USCR focuses specifically on persons displaced for reasons comparable to those that cause refugees to flee, such as war and persecution, and who would be considered refugees if they fled to another country. Many internally displaced Filipinos fall into that category. Development projects and urban renewal schemes also displace a large number of Filipinos, and they too are vulnerable [see Box]. In this report, "internally displaced persons" refers to those displaced for refugee-like reasons.)*

In July 1997, a new offensive by the Armed Forces of the Philippines against Muslim insurgents displaced more than 45,000 people. Like millions of other Filipinos who have been uprooted from their homes during the last three decades, the recently displaced have experienced the horror and casualties of conflict, the upheaval of flight, and the uncertainty and privation of displacement. While many of those who became displaced in the 1970s and 1980s are thought to have settled permanently in Manila and other urban centers, most of those uprooted in recent years have returned home after relatively short periods of displacement. Upon return, however, they may find their houses looted or destroyed, their crops lost or animals dead, and little assistance to help them rebuild their lives.

The plight of internally displaced Filipinos has received some attention—though limited response—within the Philippines, but is largely unknown outside that country. For years, the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) received conflicting reports regarding the nature and extent of internal displacement in the Philippines, and regarding the gravity of displaced Filipinos' situation. In

April 1997, USCR visited the Philippines to clarify these reports and gather first-hand information about the number of displaced persons, their location, the causes of their displacement, their needs, the extent to which those needs were being met, and what more should be done to ensure that the displaced receive greater attention on this ongoing yet often-forgotten humanitarian crisis.

USCR met with a number of local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, human rights groups, academics, and government officials in Manila. USCR also traveled to Zamboanga, Mindanao province, to meet local NGOs and representatives of displaced persons from Basilan province. This report is based, in part, on USCR's observations and findings during its site visit.

## **Background**

During the 1980s, much of the displacement that USCR terms "refugee-like" was caused by the conflict between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the New People's Army (NPA), an insurgent group associated with the Communist Party of the Philippines. The NPA was founded in 1969 and was active throughout the 1970s, but reached its peak in the 1980s when its combatant force grew to 25,000-strong and conflict between the NPA and AFP displaced hundreds of thousands of people. The AFP/NPA conflict largely ended in the early 1990s, but many of those displaced by it remain in Manila and other urban centers, often squatting in what have become semi-permanent slums.

In the mid-1990s, displacement is mostly



associated with the conflict between the AFP and Moro insurgents, particularly in Mindanao, one of the three largest islands in the Philippine archipelago. "Moros" are Muslims who live primarily in Mindanao. The conflict, which arose from Moros' complaints that the Christian, mostly Catholic, majority in the Philippines treats them as second-class citizens, is long-standing. In the 1970s, the conflict led to the deaths of more than 50,000 persons and caused hundreds of thousands of others to become internally displaced. Tens of thousands of Moros also migrated to Malaysia, to the largely Muslim province of Sabah, on the island of Borneo. The Malaysian authorities regarded them as economic migrants rather than as refugees, but permitted them to remain. Recently, there have discussions between the government of Malaysia and the Philippines regarding the future of the Moros in Sabah.

The AFP/Muslim conflict continued during the 1980s, but received less attention than the fighting between the AFP and NPA, which was at its peak during those years and often affected areas closer to Manila. Since the waning of the communist insurgency, the AFP/Muslim conflict, and the displacement associated with it, have again become more prominent.

For many years, the main Moro protagonist in the AFP/Moro conflict was the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which, like the NPA, was established in 1969. A second group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) surfaced in 1978, and more recently, a third group, the Islamic fundamentalist Abu Sayyaf, has become active. Both the MNLF and MILF, which are associated with particular ethnic groups, are based in Mindanao (MNLF supporters are primarily ethnic Suluanos, MILF supporters are mainly Maguindanao), while the Abu Sayyaf group is based primarily on the small island of Basilan, near the southeastern tip of Mindanao.

On September 2, 1996, the Philippine government signed a peace agreement with the MNLF, ending 25 years of conflict with that group. The MNLF's leader, Nur Misuari, ran for and was elected governor of the four-province Muslim Mindanao Autonomous Region that had been established in 1990. The government also offered the MNLF a major role in a special economic development zone it created in the region.

At the time of USCR's visit to the Philippines in April 1997, some MNLF members were complaining that the government had not delivered

on its promises, and were warning the government that they might resume armed struggle if their expectations were not met. Also in April, the UN offered the Philippines several million dollars to help implement the 1996 peace agreement.

The MILF was not a party to the peace agreement with the MNLF and continued to fight the government, although it engaged in peace talks with the government. The MILF suspended the talks during the recent fighting, but did not break them off altogether. In mid-1997, a government offensive severely weakened the MILF, which on July 30 signed a cease-fire and resumed negotiations.

## **Causes of Displacement**

According to the Ecumenical Commission for Displaced Families and Communities (ECDFC), a Filipino nongovernmental organization (NGO) that advocates for the rights of the internally displaced, internal displacement is most often caused by "counter-insurgency operations by the military [and] armed encounters between the military and rebel forces." A multi-NGO team that visited the municipality of Tipo-Tipo on Basilan Island to investigate the situation of more than 10,000 displaced people in October 1996 said, "Intensified military actions and offensive operations against...lawless elements, plain bandits, Abu Sayyaf...and MILF rebels resulted in [both] forced and voluntary mass" displacement.

Residents of villages in areas where the military is carrying out counter-insurgency operations flee for several reasons. Some flee simply to escape fighting between the AFP and the insurgents. Others flee because they fear the military, which various sources told USCR sometimes loots villagers' homes, burns their houses, harasses or intimidates them, and in some instances allegedly physically abuses them.

Still others flee because the military bombs or shells their villages. Some groups claim that the military does this deliberately, because it considers the villages' residents to be supporters of the insurgents. Some observers with whom USCR spoke said that the military attacks the villages because insurgents are present there, either visiting or staying with relatives, or taking cover. A displaced person in Basilan said, "The military equate the local people with the rebel groups. They say they [the insurgents] are the villagers' relatives and there-



fore the villagers support them. That is their equation. It's as simple as that." He denied that all villages assist or even sympathize with the insurgents. "Some communities don't even want to allow the rebels to enter, but the rebels are armed so we can't refuse. It's true that the rebels have relatives in the villages, but that doesn't mean that the village supports the rebels." One local NGO worker told USCR that "sometimes the military attack villages that have no connection with the MILF."

While in some instances the AFP warns villages of impending operations, at other times it attacks without warning, making it impossible for civilians to get out of harm's way. The NGO team that investigated the displacement in the Tipo-Tipo area said, "A total of 600 bombs, more or less, exploded and hit the civilian houses, school, and mosques within the vicinity. Looting and destruction of properties were done...and were accounted to the military." A local NGO interviewed the leader of one of the affected villages in the Tipo Tipo area, who said that when the military allowed the displaced to return to their homes they found that "their houses were forcibly opened and their personal belongings were missing."

An NGO team also conducted a fact-finding mission to various villages in Maguindanao and North Cobato Provinces, both on Mindanao Island,

to assess the needs of several thousand internally displaced people in September 1996. It described a similar scenario, saying: "About 200 rounds of cannon shells hit the populated [areas]....The military operation went on for several days, with reports of thousands of individuals displaced, some civilians killed and wounded, a number of houses destroyed, and looting of property."

Another source argued, however, that the insurgents sometimes provoke attacks on villages by firing mortars at AFP positions from within villages. The same source, associated with an international group, doubted that the AFP deliberately targets civilians, noting that the government espouses a policy of winning the hearts and minds of the people. The source added, however, that he believes that "there is widespread individual misbehavior [by soldiers]" and that the military also "sometimes does bomb indiscriminately."

A report by another NGO team that visited internally displaced persons in the Carmen, Cotabato area of Mindanao in February 1996 found that some 200 armed men assumed to be associated with the MILF forced the residents of a local village to evacuate their homes in order to use the village as a base to ambush government forces. A village resident told the team that the armed men "forced them to hastily vacate their houses," which they then occupied.

### **Interview with Displaced Person from Basilan Island**

I am from *Barangay* Cambog, Municipality of Tipo Tipo. Our *Barangay* has about 180 houses and around 2,000 inhabitants, most of whom are either fishermen or coconut farmers.

*Barangay* Cambog has seen a lot of fighting between the army and the MILF. One day in October 1996, the military came into *Barangay* Cambog without notice and destroyed three stores. A day after that, the military was ambushed by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

The next day, a member of the military brigade told the municipal Mayor that the people of our *sitio* must evacuate to another *Barangay*.

Because of what I was told, I instructed my people to go to a nearby *sitio*. In the next few days there was more fighting. Two houses were damaged and one was completely destroyed. Then another army regiment entered the *sitio* where we had taken refuge and the civilians there had to flee to another nearby *Barangay*. After a few days, the military withdrew from the area, but before they left, they looted the village and stole some of the people's personal belongings.





*An internally displaced woman in the Philippines being interviewed by a local NGO about her experience. She said her husband and son were killed by a bomb explosion.*

*Photo: courtesy "Balay"*

### **Scale of Displacement**

According to the Philippine Red Cross, between 1972 and 1984, the AFP's conflicts with the NPA and Moro insurgents displaced more than 5.7 million Filipinos, a large number of whom settled permanently in urban areas (though many of them continue to face the threat of re-displacement due to urban renewal projects). In recent years, the number of people who have become displaced has diminished, but displacement has remained a very real problem. That problem is often hidden, however, because the number of people who are displaced at any given point in time is deceptively low.

When USCR visited the Philippines in April, only several thousand people were internally displaced. Yet a review of the number displaced at given points during the last three years reflects a very different reality. According to ECDFC, in 1995 some 12,000 families (approximately 60,000 persons) were displaced. In 1996, more than 18,600 families (approximately 93,000 persons) were dis-

placed. During the first half of 1997, some 29,800 families (approximately 178,500 persons) became displaced. ECDFC emphasizes that even though for most people the period of displacement is "short-lived," the problem of displacement remains "widespread."

### **Conditions for the Displaced**

According to Balay, a Filipino NGO that provides psychosocial services to internally displaced individuals and families, "Mass evacuations [displacements] are usually conducted with haste and harassments; the families simply flee their homes to seek refuge in the hinterlands with nary a provision. Some seek temporary shelter in local parishes, the local public schools, or in the homes of their kin." Balay added that among the problems the displaced face are "food scarcity, congestion, and the lack of health and medical facilities." ECDFC adds that displaced Filipinos "live in abject poverty and suffer...human rights violations."

An NGO team that visited Basilan in November 1996 to assess the situation for more than 10,000 people who had become displaced the previous month described their situation as follows:

*The evacuees [displaced] were now scattered with host families and relatives...in two major host communities.... Some 225 families [more than 1,000 persons] who could no longer be accommodated by the host families were staying in...makeshift shelters with coconut leaves as walls, while other families took shelter in... [Islamic] schools.... The evacuees still refused to go back [home] for fear of being caught in the crossfire of another [military] operation.*

An NGO team that had visited displaced persons in Maguindanao and North Cotabato provinces in October 1996 found that "a number of displaced adults and children have already contracted various illnesses, such as flu, coughs, fever, and skin irritations due to lack of food supplies and medicines....Their situation is further aggravated by...the lack of any hospital nearby." The team's report added that the displaced were mostly living in the homes of relatives and friends because they were "hesitant to put up a common temporary evacuation center because of an incident in 1995 where an



## **“We Panicked and Fled”**

I am from *sitio* [village] Apermatican, *barangay* [township] Matecan, Municipality of Plantawan. On the fourth of April, a resident of our village told us that the army was going to conduct a military raid there because the Abu Sayyaf group was in the area.

The next morning, shooting started at around 5:00 a.m. So we panicked and fled. The army tried to stop us, but we kept on going until we reached a nearby *barangay*, from where we could hear more gunshots and bomb explosions. We waited there; the firing continued until about 12:30 p.m.

That afternoon, the military told us that it was safe to go back to our village, but we stayed where we were, fearing that we would be caught in another battle. After two days, we returned to our village and saw that our houses had been burned down. Realizing that our village was destroyed, we immediately went back to the nearby *barangay*. The next day we left for Isabella [Basilan’s largest town], to stay with our relatives.

Twenty of us have been living with our relatives in a small house in Isabella to this date. Our livelihood depends on coconuts, but we can’t go back home, where our coconut plantations are, because the army is still there. Our relatives are able to provide for us to some extent, though.

As a result, we are seeking help from humanitarian agencies to help us meet our basic needs, because for some time after we became displaced our family did not receive any form of assistance from anyone. More recently, the government has started providing us with food supplies of three kilos of rice and two cans of sardines per family.

We aren’t sure when we will be able to return home, because both the military and the Abu Sayyaf group are there, and it is still too dangerous. Even when we are able to return to our village, I don’t know how we will be able to rebuild our home, because no one is there to help us.

evacuation center...was bombed, resulting in the deaths of five individuals.”

On the other hand, another source familiar with the issue of displacement told USCR, “I would not say that the situation of displaced persons is overdramatic. There is need, of course, but there are also some means of assistance.”

### **Government and NGO Response**

According to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), the responsibility for providing basic relief to internally displaced persons lies with local governments. The local governments work with municipal-level Disaster Coordinating Councils, on which local NGOs are also represented. As local governments do not have sufficient funds to respond to the needs of the displaced, the national government provides local governments

food and other types of assistance for the displaced. According to the DSWD, “the government is responding in all cases [of displacement] without exception. If it [the displacement] is for more than a few days, the government comes in with assistance.” The DSWD added that the government stockpiles food in all regions of the country for such emergencies.

The DSWD also said that the government, including the national Human Rights Commission, assists the displaced after they have returned home, providing support through food-for-work programs, medical assistance, and aid intended to help them re-establish means of earning a livelihood.

One NGO official said, however, that government aid to the displaced is “haphazard,” and that the government usually depends on NGOs to advise it of when and where displacement occurs. The representative of another NGO said, “The government has ‘programs’ [for the displaced], but it



## Development Displacement

Although USCR focuses on what it terms “refugee-like” displaced persons, the situation for Filipinos displaced by what some local NGOs term “development aggression” is at least as acute, and “development displacement” is an all too common—and growing—phenomenon.

According to the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA), in order to realize its goal of “achieving the status of newly industrialized country by the year 2000,” the Philippines government has undertaken a large-scale campaign of development that NGOs say targets, rather than benefits, ordinary people. In a report presented to the 53rd Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva in 1996, PAHRA called the plan, known as the Medium-Term Development Plan (Philippines 2000), “inappropriate, unempowering, and unsustainable,” and said that one of its main effects is the wholesale displacement of communities to make way for development projects. The report also said that “the displacement of groups of people due to armed conflict or so-called ‘development’ projects continues to stand out as the most serious human rights violation [in the Philippines] in the last two years.”

Balay said, “In the course of implementing the expansion projects outlined in the said program [Philippines 2000], the people’s right to domicile, to a safe environment, to a source of economic subsistence, among other rights, are being trampled.” It added, “It is in this context that displacement in the Philippines is taking place.” Balay also described the effects of devel-

opment displacement as “more massive” than those of conflict-related displacement.

According to another local human rights group, the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP), the government’s Philippines 2000 plan envisions the demolition of large slum areas in and around Manila. Many of the people living in slum areas are formerly displaced persons who are squatting on the land (squatting is illegal under Philippine law). TFDP documented the demolition of more than 16,000 homes in 1995 and 1996, reportedly as part of a campaign to spruce up Manila, which hosted an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in November 1996. PAHRA adds that “in Metro Manila alone, it is estimated that [because of] systematic demolitions...a staggering 2.6 million persons would be rendered homeless.”

According to the Ministry for Social Welfare and Development, the government assumes responsibility for resettling those displaced by demolitions on government-owned land, but many people choose not to move to the resettlement sites because they are usually outside the main urban area and far from areas where work is available. A local human rights worker argued that moving to the sites is not feasible for many people not only because of the distance from work sites, but also because there are few services available at the sites. While the law requires the government to assist those displaced from government-owned land, it makes no similar provision for people displaced from private land, an omission that advocates for the displaced hope to change.

does not implement them. Its claims [that they assist all IDPs] are not true. They may come through with a small relief shipment, but that’s about it.” He added that government food aid generally consists of three kilos of rice and two cups of sardines per family, and that village leaders must even pay for the transportation of the food to the displaced. In interviews with displaced persons and DSWD staff in Sultan Kudarat, Mindanao, Balay found that the

government had given only 500 pesos (\$16) compensation to the families of those killed or wounded.

NGO representatives with whom USCR met acknowledged that local governments lack the necessary funds and resources to assist the displaced adequately, but added that sometimes they also lack experience in dealing with such matters. The report of an NGO team that carried out a fact-finding and relief mission to Basilan in June 1996



said that “proper government agencies have failed to address the plight” of internally displaced persons.

NGOs and others also criticized government rehabilitation aid to formerly displaced persons after they return home. A human rights worker told USCR, “The government is supposed to do rehabilitation for returnees, but the reality is that it is limited by lack of resources, especially at the local level.” An NGO representative added, “The government hasn’t helped anyone [in his area] rebuild burned houses.”

The DSWD acknowledged that NGOs criticize the government for being slow in its response and for not providing enough aid. But the DSWD argued that it cannot and should not distribute aid without first making an assessment of the need, and that takes time.

A number of NGOs and religious groups, both Manila- and Mindanao-based, assist the displaced. Their projects include provision of direct relief and rehabilitation services, research and documentation on the causes of displacement and needs of internally displaced persons, psychosocial rehabilitation, and advocacy on behalf of the displaced.

## Conclusion

Millions of Filipinos have been displaced from their homes in the last three decades. Thousands continue to be displaced each year. Despite the scale of displacement, and the social upheaval and personal trauma it engenders for internally displaced people, the Philippines government still does not respond satisfactorily to the needs of its displaced citizens.

Unlike some governments, the Philippines has not denied responsibility for the displaced or blocked assistance to them. Various national and local government agencies are in fact responsible for assisting the displaced. But the government does not provide them the requisite resources to do that job. A number of Filipino NGOs and some international groups try to help, but the level of need is greater than the NGOs’ ability to provide. The government needs to take steps to expand and improve its response to internally displaced people.

The Philippine military’s actions not only cause displacement, but soldiers’ destruction and looting of civilian property also increase the suffering of internally displaced people. That, of course, has to end. Actions by the insurgents that cause displacement and put civilians at risk, or target

civilians, must also end. However, until the causes of displacement in the Philippines conflict—and the grievances of the Muslim minority that underlie it—are ended, internally displaced people will continue to suffer.

The government and the MNLF succeeded in achieving a negotiated solution to their conflict, though even that peace is fragile. The government and the MILF and Abu Sayyaf group need to work toward a similar goal.

## Recommendations

USCR discussed the situation of internally displaced persons in the Philippines with a number of Filipino NGOs and human rights advocates who have assisted and advocated for displaced persons for many years. A number of the following recommendations draw from, and are intended to complement, recommendations that these groups have made.

### *The Government of the Philippines Should:*

1. Pursue, through peaceful means, a genuine resolution to the conflict that addresses the root causes of the conflict, redresses the grievances of disaffected minorities, and seeks to bring about an improvement in the lives of all Filipinos in the conflict areas;
2. Ensure, consistent with customary international humanitarian law, that civilian populations are not attacked, including by indiscriminate bombing or shelling of populated areas;
3. Prohibit soldiers from abusing or harassing civilians, or looting or destroying their property;
4. Identify and prosecute military personnel who abuse civilians or their property;
5. Educate and train the military concerning humanitarian law;
6. Improve and expand its system and capacity for providing timely and satisfactory emergency relief to internally displaced persons;
7. Compensate the families of those killed or injured; and



8. Provide adequate rehabilitation assistance to internally displaced persons when they are able to return to their homes, including short-term emergency relief, assistance to rebuild or repair houses, schools, and other basic infrastructure, and, when necessary, provide grants, loans, training, or micro-enterprise projects that will enable returnees to re-establish their ability to be self-sufficient.

***The Insurgent Groups Should:***

9. Pursue with the government a genuine resolution, through peaceful means, that addresses the root causes of the conflict, redresses the grievances of disaffected minorities, and seeks to bring about an improvement in the lives of all Filipinos in the conflict areas.

10. Abide by established peace agreements and

seek third party mediation if such agreements appear to falter; and

11. Refrain from, in accordance with customary international humanitarian law, using civilians to shield combatants, and otherwise to respect the rights of civilians.

***The International Community (Including the UN, Donors and International NGOs) Should:***

13. Support the peace process and rehabilitation efforts, and those seeking to forward and implement them; and

12. Link relief, rehabilitation, and development assistance to recipients' commitment to working toward a just and lasting peace.

