

Datu Piang: Streets without Joy

Contributed by Charina Sanz
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(Editor's Note: The author joined a media fact-finding tour in conflict-affected areas in central and northern Mindanao from October 26 to 31 organized by the Mindanao Peoples Caucus. This story is a means to give voice especially to the civilians caught in the conflict raging since August after the Supreme Court stopped the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain.)

DATU PIANG, Maguindanao -- In the afternoon rain, Raiz Adteg, 16, walked somberly on his way to bury his baby sister, 18-month-old Anariza, who died from diarrhea that morning at the evacuation center in the town plaza here.

To shield his sister from the pounding rain, Adteg held a tiny red umbrella over her body, dead only for four hours and wrapped in a malong (ethnic cloth) and tied to bamboo poles carried on the shoulders of an uncle and cousin.

"We had no money to buy medicine," said Adteg, his young face dazed and uncomprehending.

It has been more than a month now since Adteg's family fled their home in Barangay (village) Magaslong after military offensives were launched against three of 16 Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) command centers here in central Mindanao.

The offensive is still part of the fighting that escalated after the Supreme Court suspended and then effectively killed the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) that would have signaled a peace deal between the Philippine government and the Moro rebels.

“The war should stop. We want to go home,” said Adteg’s uncle as the trio headed for the cemetery. The time for prayer was looming and, in keeping with the Muslim ritual of burial, the dead should be buried before dusk.

In this historic town that lies along the famed Rio Grande de Mindanao, Anariza’s death passed unnoticed but spoke simply of the anguish and helplessness of more than 10,000 families who have sought refuge here since fighting began in early August.

Fifty-six internally displaced persons (IDPs) have already died in Maguindanao since August: 38 from illness and 18 who were caught up in fighting between government forces and the MILF according to the Department of Health in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

In a November 4 report, DOH-ARMM also reported that about 21 of the recorded deaths caused by illness were ages five years old and below. Diarrhea is the number one leading cause of death among IDPs.

The statistics included siblings Jamir, aged 3, and Jamiha, aged just one. Their father Merin Hardeng from Barangay

Irian, Datu Saudi Ampatuan spoke of how they died within a day of each other.

The rising death toll of infants and children and increase in the number of IDPs underscores the unfolding humanitarian crisis in the provinces of Maguindanao, North Cotabato, Lanao Del Sur and Lanao Del Norte.

As of November 6, the National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC) reports that 75,931 families have been displaced by the conflict.

The NDCC also reports alongside Maguindanao the municipalities of Libungan in Cotabato and Tangkal, Linamon, Kauswagan, Munai, and Kolambugan in Lanao Del Norte are under a state of calamity.

An Amnesty International report in late October claimed fighting in Mindanao since August has displaced more than 610,000 people.

In the poblacion (town plaza) here alone, some 28 evacuation centers made of blue sack tarpaulins have arisen, making the town look more like a "tent center";

Datu Piang hosts IDPs not only from its 20 barangays but also from nearby Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao and Midsayap, Pikit and Aleosan towns of North Cotabato, said Musib Uy Tan a town official.

“Moro evacuees feel safer here than going to Christian-dominated areas,” he said.

Major public buildings have been converted into evacuation centers including the Fourth Shariah Circuit Court, the Bureau of Fire Protection, the local civil registry, and the Mubarak mosque. Schools, the gym and even the public library have been turned into makeshift centers.

At the fish landing site here, pump boat drivers recalled the money they made ferrying families away from the fighting in recent months. Each ride cost the occupants PhP 500 (USD 10).

“But all is silent now. All those places over there are now ghost towns,” said pump boat driver Joel Paam, 22, pointing in the direction of barangays across the river.

But apart from fighting, evacuees still face the threat from flooding. Waters of the Rio Grande de Mindanao swell quickly during the rains forcing evacuees to transfer to higher grounds.

“Stop the war now. Life is too difficult here in the plaza,” said Farida Ginaet, 37, who joined a rally held by the evacuees in the main square.

“When will this war ever stop?” asked Farida a single mother of seven.

At a gazebo inside the plaza early last week, other mothers also raised the same question as they crowded a group of journalists whom they pleaded desperately to listen to their stories.

The journalists were participants to of a media tour visiting conflict affected areas in North Cotabato, Maguindanao, Lanao Del Sur and Lanao Del Norte which was organized by the Mindanao Peoples Caucus.

An elderly woman came forward to say her house was burned; another one said her eight-year-old son was injured by a howitzer shell. A young mother complained that the last time her family received food ration was during the Eid’Fit’ in late September where each family was given 25 kilos of rice. Help came only in trickles, she said.

“All this would stop if only the government will sign the MOA-AD,” said Syrian Baisangcupan, a community leader. Unfortunately there is little prospect of that since the agreement has already been judged ‘unconstitutional’ by a Supreme Court ruling on October 14.

Moro civil society organizations and the MILF have sounded the alarm over what they describe as a looming “international humanitarian crisis” in the face of increasing military offensives.

Lawyer Zainudin Malang of the MoroLaw Center said that Moro civil groups will set up a refugee, human rights and media secretariat to monitor the worsening plight of IDPs and the alarming rise in number of human rights violations.

They also called on the United Nations to intervene and put pressure on both government and MILF to go back to the negotiating table.

The MILF, for its part, appealed for the UN to set up an observer post to monitor the situation in some 150 IDP centers all over central Mindanao. Philippine Human Rights Reporting Project

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