



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - The Philippines

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The Philippines made mixed progress on minority rights in 2013. President Benigno Aquino has committed to resolving the bitter ethnic conflict in its deep south, making tentative progress on a peace deal with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) this year. However, violence continued to flare in its restive southern provinces, where both rebel and government forces have been implicated in serious abuses against minority populations.

In July, the two parties reached a preliminary agreement to end the decades-long conflict, fleshing out natural resource and revenue sharing mechanisms for an autonomous region known as Bangsamoro. Analysts welcomed the deal as a promising step towards durable peace in southern Philippines. But in September the insurgency saw a bloody resurgence when armed rebels belonging to a faction of the Moro National Liberal Front (MNLF) – another separatist organization – seized the Christian-majority city of Zamboanga on Mindanao Island. The three-week siege claimed dozens of lives and forced over 100,000 people from their homes. The rebels professed to be fighting for a fully independent state, visibly disgruntled by the MILF's proposals for autonomy. The attack took place shortly after the MNLF's founder, Nur Misuari, proclaimed an independent state of Bangsamoro. However, the group – which signed a peace deal with the government in 1996 – later denied authorizing the operation, which others have blamed on 'rogue' elements loyal to Misuari.

During the siege, rebels were seen abducting Christian residents for use as human shields against the Philippine army. The army responded by capturing dozens of suspected rebels, including a mentally disabled man and several other civilians who were later released without charge. Activists accused the government of using torture and vicious beatings to elicit confessions from their detainees, calling for an independent investigation into the violence.

Many obstacles remain to ending the 46-year-old conflict, which has already claimed 120,000 lives. Other rebel factions remain opposed to the proposed power-sharing deal, including the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) – a MILF breakaway group that has been implicated in a series of kidnappings and killings over the past year. Although the peace talks have been praised for their gender inclusiveness, indigenous peoples in the resource-rich Mindanao region, known collectively as the Lumad, say they have been systematically excluded.

Thousands of indigenous Lumads have also been caught in the crossfire of the festering communist insurgency – which, unlike the Muslim conflict, has received little media attention. An August report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre documented its devastating social and economic impact on indigenous communities, including gruelling poverty and isolation. It notes that Lumads 'who refuse to join defence militias and paramilitary groups are often suspected of being [communist] sympathizers', leading to arrests and persecution. The report further criticized Aquino for vetoing a landmark bill on internally displaced persons, which would have offered essential assistance to indigenous communities uprooted by a combination of conflict, land grabs and natural disasters.

Extra-judicial killings are carried out with impunity, especially in ethnic minority and indigenous areas. On 13 September, paramilitary forces linked to the government executed Benjie Planos, a Lumad tribal leader in Agusan del Sur province in Mindanao. In December, another human rights activist was murdered in Opol. The Asian Human Rights Commission has described 'a widespread pattern of abuse targeting indigenous people' for their ancestral lands. The Philippines remains one of the deadliest places in the world to be a journalist.

The most prominent example is the Tampakan mine, a US\$5.9 billion project, which, if completed, will be the largest mining operation in the country's history. But the site is also home to five ancestral domains of the Blaan indigenous people, who have expressed vocal opposition to the project. They have accused Philippine security forces of participating in targeted violence against the community and called for an independent investigation into a series of killings. In October, campaigners were outraged to hear that prosecutors had dropped charges against two military officers and 14 soldiers for the alleged murder of a tribal Blaan woman, known for her staunch criticisms of the Tampakan mine, and her two young sons. Earlier in the year, hundreds of families were forced to flee their homes in fear of a growing military presence in the area. Local activists say that indigenous women bear the brunt of violence caused by militarization.

There appeared to be growing awareness of the media's role in portraying minorities. In September, a Filipino lawmaker proposed a law that would prohibit the mention of ethnicity or religion in media reports about criminal activities to protect Muslims from unfairly being labelled 'terrorists' or 'bandits'. It follows a 2007 study by the Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication, which identified clear anti-Muslim biases in the Filipino media, especially in the context of the Moro conflict. However, the proposed law includes criminal penalties for anyone found culpable, raising concerns about free speech and freedom of the press. The Philippines already has criminal defamation laws, which can be used to target journalists.

Filipino indigenous groups are also fighting back against media discrimination and stereotypes. In October, KAMP held training to help empower indigenous people to use the media, including photography and social media, aimed at giving people their own voice. KODAO Productions, a Filipino multimedia company, is working to establish community radio stations for indigenous peoples, while supporting the production of documentaries on important social issues, such as environmental destruction and human rights. Campaigners say these perspectives are muzzled by Filipino media giants, owned and censored by corporations with lucrative financial interests in the extractive industries. It is not uncommon for indigenous activists to be publicly smeared as communist sympathizers in the local media, while stories of land grabs, targeted killings and military incursions go unreported. Indigenous women say they are stereotypically portrayed as 'good dancers, singers or entertainers', even though many play an active role in grassroots movements against militarization and large-scale development projects.

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