

The Struggle for Life and Land in the Philippines

Based on eye witness reports from indigenous Philippine leaders asking for international solidarity when they visited when they visited Minneapolis/St. Paul on a U.S. tour.

Indigenous people—known as Lumad people in Mindanao, the southern part of the Philippines, have been under attack by Philippine army, police, and paramilitary groups who are trying to coerce them into giving up their land; resources; and constitutional rights for free, prior, and informed consent; and to abandon their very cultures and heritages for the sake of development projects and capitalist ventures. They have used heinous methods to get rid of the people who stand in their way.

On September 15, 2015, one paramilitary group, at a distance of only 50 yards from Philippine soldiers, went into a village, gathered the residents, and murdered three top leaders. The perpetrators told the people that they were not respectful and accepting of a mineral mine that was coming to the land. In two days, the paramilitaries promised to return to kill anyone who remained in the area. 3,000 people fled. Later, incredibly, the leaders and religious groups in the area who helped the people get away were charged with human trafficking.

Danger to the people appeared to increase in 2016. In the spring and summer of 2016, Lumad leaders toured the U.S. to explain what has been happening to them.

Josephine Pagalan, a mother, teacher, and a spokesperson for a regional organization of indigenous people, said that she was among the villagers forced to witness the murder of her village's leaders. She cannot help but cry recalling the tragedy. She receives death threats on her cell phone whenever she makes a statement publically, but she said that as a survivor of the massacre she feels she is now called to be a leader and that she would rather die than give up the struggle.

Monico Cayog, an elder and chairperson of the Alliance of Indigenous People's Organizations in Mindanao, spoke about how sacred the ancestral land is to the people and how they regard the earth as the mother from whom all life is born. Through a translator he explained: "Now we see that our mother is being raped [by the extraction industry] and as Josephine says we do not fear death because we're standing for what is ours, for what is righteous. Our own government has looked down on us, but the Native Americans in the U.S. support us." He went on to say: "Aid that comes from the U.S. is being used to kill us."

How You Can Help: The Lumad people are asking for help from individuals and groups outside the Philippines. The following organizations were established to give facts, direct support, and plan campaigns to alleviate conditions:

Mindanao Interfaith Services Foundation, Inc. (Percenita Sanchez: percy56@yahoo.com);

Salugpongan International (Anthony
Navarro: salugpongan.international@gmail.com);

InPeace (Francis Laminero: inpeace.info@gmail.com).

One important tool when there are incidents could be Urgent Actions, which may involve letters to Philippine leaders/ Embassy and/or U.S. Congresspersons/ State Department, publicity of situations, lobbying for investigations and changes in behavior, and corporate pressures to improve human rights.