

'More guns won't help'

Philippines' support of paramilitary groups alarms head of Jesuit university



The president of a Jesuit university in Mindanao expressed concern over the Philippine government's decision to arm paramilitary groups that double as private armies for mining companies in the restive region.

Jesuit Father Joel Tabora, president of the Ateneo de Davao University, said the government approval of additional funds to arm civilian groups and private armies is disturbing, particularly amid a recent series of attacks on tribal leaders and their communities.

The priest said the proliferation of firearms in areas where tribal people struggle over their rights, and the deployment of armed militias and soldiers, will only lead to the deaths of more people.

"Fundamentally, the [indigenous people] want to be left alone. They want to live their lives as they judge fit. More guns won't help," said Father Tabora.

On Sept. 1, armed paramilitary groups and soldiers entered the village of Han-ayan in Lianga town, Surigao del Sur province, killing two tribal leaders and the executive director of the Alternative Learning Center for Agriculture and Livelihood Development.

The killings triggered the evacuation of some 3,000 indigenous people, who continue to live in makeshift shelters in the city of Tandag.

On Oct. 13, Archbishop Nereo Odchimar of Tandag warned that indigenous people in Mindanao have become victims of a protracted war between the Philippine military and the New People's Army, a communist rebel group.

Father Tabora said indigenous people are "sucked willy nilly" into the conflict, yet the only thing that local communities want "is to be free."

"They want to work their lands according to their customs and traditions, see to the education and welfare of their children, and be happy within the national fold of Filipino peoples," he said.

The priest said that conflicts emerge when businesses take an interest in ancestral lands, which are rich in mineral resources. This drives indigenous communities out by force.

Meanwhile, indigenous peoples' organizations across Asia have issued a joint call for an immediate end to the killings of tribal people in Mindanao.

In a letter to Philippine President Benigno Aquino, 73 Asian indigenous organizations expressed their "extreme alarm" over the spate of killings of Filipino tribal leaders in recent months.

"These incidents occurred while a credible investigation on the spate of killings and other abuses ... is yet to take place," read the letter signed by member organizations of the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact.

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