

Philippines: Claretian Missionaries seek answers on Basilan violence



Rescuers, including American soldiers, treat the ambush victims.

Missionaries working in rural Basilan province challenged the government and the Catholic Church Friday to do something about the spate of violence in the province, after another bloody incident this week.

Since October 2011, there have been three ambushes in Basilan, killing 17 people and injuring at least 40 others.

“We question those in authority, what have you done to protect and grant justice to the lives of the people?” the Claretian Missionaries said in a statement. “We ask the Church, what have we done to the values of the people and appreciation for peace?”

Eight people were killed and at least 22 others were wounded Wednesday after suspected members of the Al-Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf Group ambushed a four-vehicle convoy of rubber plantation workers in the town of Sumisip.

Most of the victims were workers of the Tumajubong Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Development Council who were on their way to work.

Taha Katu, the council's manager, said that prior to the attack, the group received extortion letters purportedly from Abu Sayyaf, demanding payment of more than US\$1,000 a month in exchange for not being harmed.

Abu Sayyaf gunmen also killed five workers in a similar ambush near the area in 2011.

"We question the military, why are our people caught in the path of the bullets?" the religious group said. "The Claretians shall not tire in condemning this senseless violence and blatant disregard for the value of life."

They blamed lack of political will to find a solution and an emphasis on economic profits over stability for the continued violence in the province.

Mujiv Hataman, regional governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, told ucanews.com in a telephone interview that the investigation into Wednesday's incident is ongoing.

"Somebody has to answer for this deplorable act," Hataman said.

The rebel Moro Islamic Liberation Front has also condemned the incident, describing it as an "act of barbarism."

Mohammad Ameen, head of the group's secretariat, said the killing is "unfit for people who still claim to be [Muslim] believers."

Colonel Arthur Ang, the local military commander, said more troops have been deployed in the area to provide security for the workers.

The Claretian congregation whose priests and missionaries have been working in the province for more than five decades have already called on armed groups in the province “to put aside hostilities and greed.”

“We call on all communities in Basilan to condemn this act and dispel all fear that these savage armed groups wish to paralyze the people with,” the congregation said.

Basilan is a rugged, jungle-clad island in the southern Philippines and is a known stronghold of the Abu Sayyaf group that has been blamed for terror attacks in the country and the kidnapping of foreign nationals.

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