

PRESS RELEASE

Indigenous peoples left out in government's peace and development agenda

QUEZON CITY, 8 August – Despite being left out in the government's peace and development agenda, indigenous peoples' leaders and members are pushing for "genuine" participation in the peace processes and other areas of governance.

And before it congratulates itself in claiming to have made breakthroughs in the peace process, at least with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the government must not rush to claim that "peace is within reach," say indigenous leaders and representatives.

"The reality is that until now indigenous communities are being caught in the crossfire between the warring forces (in southern Philippines)," said Datu Eduard Banda, chair of the Magpet Tribal Council of Elders in north Cotabato.

Banda was one of 80 participants in an August 7-8 National Forum on Indigenous Peoples and the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (2014) held here as part of celebrating the UN-designated International Day for World's Indigenous Peoples, which falls on August 9.

President Benigno Simeon Aquino III in his last State of the Nation Address or SONA said that "peace is within reach in a region that has long been torn apart by conflict." He was referring to the Framework Agreement on the Bangsa Moro, which was signed in October 2012 and the recent signing last July of the second annex of the agreement.

But even as Mr. Aquino reported in his SONA developments in the government-MILF peace process, the MILF breakaway Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) has continued to attack government security forces.

The continuing skirmishes -- not only between government troops and the BIFF, but also between government forces and other armed groups in southern Philippines -- continue to sow terror among indigenous communities, said Banda.

Buoyed by the "straight-path" promise of Mr. Aquino, Banda and other indigenous leaders and representatives met to forge an "Indigenous Peoples' Agenda" shortly after the new President officially took his oath of office in 2010. They then presented their agenda in Malacanang.

The IP Agenda had six themes, one of which was indigenous peoples' participation in the government and MILF peace talks, the Bangsa Moro Juridical Entity and the government and National Democratic Front peace talks.

But three years into the Aquino presidency, indigenous leaders say government has practically snubbed their agenda. Save for seeking to cover indigenous peoples in the government's PhilHealth program, indigenous peoples remain unsecured in their lands and territories which, indigenous leaders say, are the targets of big mining firms, logging and plantations.

Despite all, indigenous peoples from Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao yesterday have formulated an updated IP agenda, consolidated from previous calls, to be submitted to the government with

a new congress. The agenda will also be submitted to the high-level plenary meeting of the sixty-ninth session of the UN General Assembly in New York, also known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, in September 2014.

The updated agenda have four themes: indigenous lands, territories, resources and “development aggression;” National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, conflicting laws and policies, and free and prior informed consent; and, social services, Millennium Development Goals and disaster response.

On the first theme, indigenous leaders say they are losing their lands, territories and resources to land grabbers, mining and logging companies, and to plantations.

“We are losing our lands to land grabbers,” said Elsie Mokudéf of Teduray Lambangian Women’s Organization in South Upi, Maguindanao. Her organization is thus calling for autonomy of indigenous peoples within the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao or ARMM as a mechanism to secure their lands and resources.

Protecting and defending their lands and resources from alleged land grabbers, including big companies, has proved risky, say indigenous leaders. The Kalipunan ng mga Katutubong Mamamayan ng Pilipinas or KAMP cites that during the Aquino presidency, some 35 indigenous leaders, including 5 indigenous women and 4 children were killed.

They are thus calling either for the revocation or repeal of what they consider as unjust laws and policies such as the Mining Act of 1995 and the Joint Administrative Order No. 1 of the Departments of Agrarian Reform and Environment and Natural Resources, Land Registration Administration, and National Commission on Indigenous Peoples.

They blame these laws and policies as favoring big companies, which allegedly violate indigenous peoples’ rights as contained in the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act, the UN Declaration of Indigenous Peoples, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), and other international agreements.

The national forum was organized by the Philippines UNDRIP Network, Tebtebba, KAMP, Cordillera Peoples Alliance, Koalisyon ng mga Katutubong Samahan ng Pilipinas (KASAPI) and Philippine Task Force on Indigenous Peoples.

During the second day of the forum, the participants shared their updated indigenous peoples’ agenda with representatives of concerned government and UN agencies.

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