

“Bakwits” to military, rebels: fight your war elsewhere

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KITCHARAO, Agusan del Norte — Forced out of their homes and prevented from returning to their farms, the “bakwits” or internally displaced persons (IDPs) from an upland community in this town are imploring rebels and government troops alike to spare them from more skirmishes.

“Unta mag-giyera sila sa lugar nga walay mapagan, di kay diha nga naa mi nanimuyo ug nanginabuhi,” (They should fight where no one would be caught in a crossfire, not in a place where are homes and livelihood are) said Nemisio Mantos, a ginger farmer.

Mantos is one of the 200 residents who fled Zapanta Valley in Barangay Bangayan after a series of clashes between the New People’s Army (NPA) and government troops that began last weekend.

One soldier was killed, and four others were wounded in the firefight on November 6.

It was the third time this year for Mantos and his neighbors to leave the plains of Zapanta Valley, a farming community along the Surigao del Norte-Agusan del Norte border where clashes between rebels and government forces often erupt. The last two encounters occurred on May 14 and September 1.

The evacuees, whose ages range from 76 years to as young as one month, have been staying for two weeks in a public school at the barangay proper, sleeping on the floor and living off the kindness of cause-oriented groups.

Government relief goods arrived last Friday but the evacuees said the supplies could barely meet their needs.

Salvador C. Espaniola, a 76-year-old farmer, did not have the faintest idea when he and his family could return home and tend his rice field once more. What he knew is that the community’s combined 20-hectare rice fields would be left to rot if it can’t be harvested soon.

The same fate awaits Mantos’s ginger farm.

“Kinahanglan na ma-harvest ang luy-a sa saktong panahon aron di madaot. “Wala gyod mi income diri sa evacuation site; kulang na gain ang rasyon namo,” (Ginger needs to be harvested at the right time lest it would rot. We really have no income here at the evacuation site; our ration is not enough) Mantos explained.

Barangay Councilor Lutgardo M. Villamor, himself a “bakwit”, shared the sentiment, saying that farmers in the area did not only leave their farmlands but their livestock as well.

“Mao ra mi ani pirmi, sigi lang bakwit panahon kon adunay susama aning panghitabo,” (It has always been this way for us, always on the run whenever things like this happen) Villamor complained.

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And this may last for long.

A military spokesperson said Zapanta Valley residents can't be allowed to go back to the area because of ongoing offensive operations against the rebels.

“Tactical offensives will continue to hunt down rebels in the area,” said 1st Lt. Joe Patrick A. Martinez of the 30th Infantry Battalion community relations unit, based in Placer town in Surigao del Norte.

The military considers Zapanta Valley the “center of gravity” of NPA activity, where NPA fronts from three provinces—Agusan del Norte, Surigao del Norte and Surigao del—usually gather, said Martinez.

He said this was the reason why the military has controlled the entry of goods in the area and its surrounding upland communities.

“We need to contain these areas to weaken the activities of the rebels,” he said, admitting that restricting the flow of people and goods was part of this strategy.

Insults

But this tactic, a throwback to the Martial Law years and termed then as “population and resource control”, has earned the ire of upland residents like those living in Zapanta Valley.

“Every time a sack of rice is delivered to us, the military would get suspicious and say it came from the NPA. The same suspicion is thrown at us when we bring supplies for our consumption to our communities in the uplands,” said a mother who requested anonymity for fear of reprisal.

“It is insulting. We don't know where to place ourselves; we don't know which way to go,” she said in the dialect.

For 76-year-old farmer Ernesto M. Cripio, living in a flashpoint like Zapanta Valley was like being constantly squeezed in a sandwich.

“You fear both sides (army and the NPA), so you have walk on tiptoes or else get caught in the crossfire,” Cripio said in the dialect.

Salvador, the other septuagenarian among the evacuees, recalled the times when the people in Zapanta Valley only had to fear and endure wild animals.

“When I arrived here in the 50's, wild animals roamed the plains. We only had to worry about wild boars because they are fearsome and would occasionally damage our crop,” he said.

Cripio and Espaniola, like other elders in the community, saw only one solution to their perennial woes: “The military and the NPA should leave us alone because we are a peaceful community. We just want to tend our farms and animals, that's all.” (Roel N. Catoto/MindaNews)

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