

COVID-19 lockdown keeps 1,500 Moro families from fleeing far from 'rido' gun battles

By: Edwin O. Fernandez - @inquirerdotnetInquirer Mindanao / 08:16 PM May 11, 2020

COTABATO CITY – Hundreds of families in remote villages of Pikit town, Cotabato province fled their homes on Sunday (May 10) as fighting erupted anew between two clans with an ongoing rido, or bloody feud, officials said.

But they can't go far and had moved to villages that are still near the gunfights because of COVID-19 lockdowns preventing border crossings.

Dulia Sultan, provincial board member, said at least 1,500 families, or 9,000 individuals, had been displaced from three villages of Pikit.

The displaced families sought refuge in villages near theirs but cannot evacuate to Pikit because of a lockdown in the town for COVID-19.

Pikit Mayor Sumulong Sultan said clashes occurred in the villages of Takepan, Bulol and Talitay on Sunday between members of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) involved in a long-running clan war over land.

The mayor said skirmishes began last week, sending residents fleeing.

He said he tried to intervene and mediate between the warring clans but the fighting started again on Sunday.

“People trying to avoid the bullets could not go to safer places due to community quarantine,” said Board Member Sultan. “They are still in surrounding villages near the fighting sites.”

“It is so hard on our part because we are fasting,” said Alimbai Kasan, a resident of Talitay, one of the villages that had become a battlefield.

“We are weak and we cannot rest because there are gun bursts every now and then,” said Kasan.

The feuding parties included MILF commander Benjamin Mantul of Talitay and Bhuto Sanday of the MNLF, from Pagalungan town, Maguindanao province.

Mayor Salik Mamasabulod of Pagalungan said some residents of the town's Bagoinged village also fled to other villages, fearing an attack by Mantul.

The mayor said the fighting was not between MILF and MNLF as organizations but between clans who are members of the two Moro groups.

Mayor Sultan said emissaries from MILF and MNLF had been sent to separate the warring clans.

Board Member Sultan also sought the help of the military and Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) for relief goods and a stop to the fighting.

“It hurts seeing our people in a very difficult situation during this fasting month,” Board Member Sultan said.

She said the gunmen reportedly raided several villages, torched homes and robbed civilians' homes of valuables.

She said she thought the fighting between Moro rebels and government forces had stopped after the signing of a peace agreement but now, the Moros are “fighting each other.”

“Why is this happening? I really cannot understand,” the board members said in the vernacular.

The Pikit municipal disaster office is still completing the list of the displaced families for aid distribution.

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