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PHILIPPINES: DISPLACED AND FORGOTTEN IN ZAMBOANGA

In September 2013, fighting between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and a Muslim rebel group in the port city of Zamboanga on Mindanao forced 120,000 people – primarily minority Muslims – to flee. More than a year later, tens of thousands remain displaced, living in deplorable conditions. Having endured overcrowded, unsanitary, and unsafe evacuation centers in which they initially sought refuge, they now are being sent to transitional sites that lack water, health, education, and livelihoods. Worse yet, now that another major typhoon has hit the Philippines, attention and resources are likely to shift away from the crisis. Rather than continuing to neglect their urgent needs, the Philippine government, with the support of the United Nations and donors, must prioritize finding durable solutions for Zamboanga’s forgotten displaced and recognize that doing so is an important step in the region’s peace and reconciliation process.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ The Zamboanga City government must halt the transfers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to transitional sites until humanitarian standards are met. When and if such standards are met, ensure that all transfers are voluntary, and comply with national and international laws governing the rights of IDPs regarding return, relocation, and resettlement.
- ❑ The national government must provide the requisite financial support to allow the Zamboanga City government to address the IDPs’ humanitarian and recovery needs.
- ❑ The United Nations Humanitarian Country Team members and development agencies should:
 - At the headquarters level, urgently direct financial resources to the Zamboanga response, including for the deployment of appropriately qualified and experienced international staff.
 - Immediately address the water, sanitation, and hygiene; health; education; and livelihood challenges at Mampang and other transitional sites. Do not assist with further transfers until humanitarian standards are met.
- Advocate for the right of IDPs to return and for the implementation of “no build policies” in accordance with national legislation. Adopt and implement relocation and resettlement guidance that promotes a holistic and sustainable approach.
- ❑ Donor governments should:
 - Increase funding to meet the IDPs’ humanitarian and recovery needs and to support the achievement of a durable solution to their displacement.
 - Form a Zamboanga donors group to work with the national and city governments and humanitarian and development partners to implement a durable solutions strategy for IDPs that is inclusive and part of the peace and reconciliation process.
- ❑ The U.S. Agency for International Development should:
 - Ensure that development assistance to Zamboanga City as part of the Cities Development Initiative is inclusive of durable solutions for the IDPs.

BACKGROUND

Muslim rebel groups on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao have been engaged in an armed struggle for self-determination. The conflict dates back to the 19th century, when indigenous ethnic groups known collectively as “Bangsamoros” or “Moros” resisted foreign rule by the United States.

After nearly two decades of failed peace negotiations, in October 2012, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the largest Muslim rebel group, agreed to end hostilities and, in March 2014, signed a peace agreement with the Philippine government. Under the terms of the agreement, predominately Muslim areas of the country’s south will be given greater political autonomy and control over their abundant natural resources through the establishment of a politically autonomous region: Bangsamoro. In exchange, MILF agreed to cease its rebellion and decommission its army. In 2015, a plebiscite will be conducted to determine the shape and size of the new Bangsamoro.

Not all rebel factions, however, were on board with the agreement and in September 2013, fighting broke out when a faction of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) attacked Zamboanga, a large port city on Mindanao. The ensuing 20-day siege between the Philippine army and the rebels forced 120,000 people to flee, mainly residents of the overcrowded Muslim neighborhoods of Rio Hondo, Mariki, Sta. Barbara, Sta. Catalina, and Kansanyangan. In addition, around 10,000 homes were razed during the siege. Many of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) took refuge in evacuation centers (ECs), primarily the Joaquin F. Enriquez Memorial Sports Complex, a large outdoor stadium located in downtown Zamboanga city, and along a nearby shoreline area called Cawa-Cawa.

Early first-hand assessments by the UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator and heads of humanitarian agencies found that congested conditions inside the ECs and prolonged displacement were increasing health and protection risks to IDPs.

In early November 2013, less than two months after the siege ended, the humanitarian crisis in Zamboanga was suddenly eclipsed when Typhoon Haiyan, the strongest typhoon ever to make landfall, hit the Eastern Visayas region of the Philippines. The storm killed more than 7,000 people, rendered over four million homeless, and left some 13 million people in need of emergency humanitarian aid. The Philippine government declared a national emergency and requested international logistical and humanitarian assistance. The UN declared a Level 3 Emergency, its

highest level for humanitarian crises, triggering significant staff and resource deployments by UN agencies.

The enormity of the disaster Haiyan left in its wake pulled attention and resources away from the humanitarian needs of IDPs in Zamboanga – and understandably so. Nonetheless, the humanitarian conditions that RI encountered when it visited IDP sites in Zamboanga in November 2014 – more than a year after the crisis erupted and several months since the government declared an end to the Haiyan humanitarian phase – were alarming and require immediate attention at the highest levels.

A DETERIORATING HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

More than a year into the crisis, an estimated 38,000 people remain displaced, either living with host families or at government-designated displacement sites. Of immediate concern is the welfare of more than 20,000 people who remain displaced in overcrowded ECs and transitional sites around the city. Predominantly Muslim, most are Tausaug and Sama (also known as Bajau), indigenous ethnic groups who were already extremely poor and vulnerable prior to the emergency.

The most pressing problems facing the IDPs include overcrowding, lack of access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); alarmingly low health and nutrition conditions, especially among children; and lack of access to livelihoods. As of late November, there have been 209 deaths, almost half of whom were children, with the emergency threshold of deaths for children under age five having been breached at least six times. A recent assessment of malnutrition in evacuation centers and transitional sites revealed that over half of all children 24 months and older are malnourished and in need of supplementary feeding. The World Food Program closed operations in Zamboanga at the end of August 2014.

RI is particularly concerned about the conditions at the Mampang (also known as Masepla) transitional site, where more than 4,000 IDPs have been transferred since it opened in May 2014. The bunkhouses at the site are overcrowded and do not meet SPHERE standards, although additional bunkhouses are being built to accommodate some of the larger families.

Of particular concern is the lack of sufficient WASH facilities. Like other IDP transitional sites RI visited, Mampang is not connected to the municipal water system. At the time of RI’s visit, water was being shipped to the site via water trucks with IDPs receiving 8.6 liters of water per person per day, well below the SPHERE Standard of 15-20 liters per day. When asked why more water was not being

delivered, RI was told that the city only had two water trucks available to deliver water and that neither humanitarian agencies nor the city had sufficient funds to provide additional water trucks. Moreover, on days when it rains, the access road becomes impassable and the water cannot be delivered at the site. IDPs are forced to walk through the mud to access the water – something that is impossible for the elderly or infirm. The city has been unable to get permission from landowners adjacent to the site to upgrade the access road and lay pipes to connect to the water system. IDPs with whom RI spoke said that there is no water about half the time and that fights often break out among people when water trucks do arrive. One IDP told RI that she sold her clothes in order to buy drinking water.

In addition, there are an insufficient number of latrines: 35.9 persons per latrine at the time of RI's visit, versus the SPHERE standard of 20 persons per latrine. When RI visited Mampang, 24 of the toilets were not functioning. A serious de-sludging problem had not been addressed for weeks. One NGO worker told RI, "I fear that there will be a cholera outbreak and this is what it will take – for people to die – for action to be taken."

The poor WASH conditions have contributed to the IDPs' poor health – as evidenced by the alarmingly high mortality rates. Yet there is no clinic at Mampang and only one medical officer who visits the site (which currently houses more than 4,000 people) twice a week. One woman urged RI's team to look at her eight-month-old grandson who was visibly ill and severely malnourished. When asked whether she had spoken to the healthcare worker, she said that the healthcare worker had told her that the child needed to be taken to the hospital. She had not done so, she explained, because she did not have any money to get there. According to a Zamboanga City Health Office official, the local government simply does not have enough money or manpower to meet the healthcare needs at Mampang and there is no hospital located nearby the site. The city has asked the national government for more medical staff but at the time of RI's visit was still awaiting a response.

An overarching problem appeared to be the lack of reliable current or baseline data regarding the health and welfare of IDPs, including changes in nutrition rates over time. Several humanitarian actors also said that the cultural habits of the Bajau people had undermined nutrition, WASH, healthcare and/or other interventions. One year since the crisis erupted, it was surprising to find that even agencies that had been there from the onset seemed to lack a good grasp of Bajau culture or whether the conditions of IDPs had improved or worsened over time.

With respect to education, there are no schools at the Mampang site. Approximately 1,000 children at the site are not in school. With their former schools located miles away, and no money to pay for public transportation, it is not surprising that only around 300 children are still attending school. At the time of RI's visit, a temporary transportation subsidy had expired and there did not appear to be plans by the city or humanitarian actors to support a transportation system or subsidy that would allow IDP children to attend school.

Mampang's distance from fishing areas and lack of resources for public transportation mean that IDPs – most of whom derive their income from fishing – are also struggling to access livelihoods. Poor to begin with, having lost their homes and what limited assets they had, and having been displaced for more than a year, the majority of IDP households currently lack the requisite capital and equipment needed to sustainably recover from the negative shocks to their household economy, as revealed in a recent livelihoods survey conducted by Ateneo de Zamboanga University Research Center with the support of the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) ENGAGE project.

One IDP woman with whom RI spoke described her life in Mampang as follows: "I'm only telling you the truth and the truth is that it is very hard to live here. We don't have any money or transportation. My children don't even go to school. We don't have enough food... My only hope is to go back to my former living place as soon as possible so I can make a living and support my children." Numerous other IDPs expressed the same concerns.

Despite its undesirable location and lack of services, in all likelihood Mampang will be one of the only options offered to IDPs. At present, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is constructing Mampang II, an additional 300 single detached transitional shelters adjacent to the bunkhouses. It is expected that the IDPs currently residing in the Sports Complex will be transferred there. At the time of RI's visit, Mampang II also lacked access to water and other services. The government also plans to build permanent shelters for IDPs on a plot of land north of the Mampang sites as part of its Zamboanga Roadmap to Recovery and Reconstruction plan (Z3R). Unfortunately, the plan only includes construction of housing, leaving out access to services and livelihoods. At the time of RI's visit, neither Mampang II nor the permanent site had access to water. At the same time, according to humanitarian actors, the city's decision to relocate IDPs to Mampang has encountered hostility from the local community which may in part explain

the unwillingness of local landowners to give necessary permission to upgrade access to public services at the site.

Despite these serious concerns, and the fact that the site is simply not ready to receive additional families, the Zamboanga City government is continuing to press for further transfers of IDPs to Mampang and putting significant pressure on humanitarian agencies to adhere to its December 15 deadline for removing 2,000 families (10,000 people) from the Sports Complex. During an inter-agency meeting that RI attended at which the problems at the site were discussed, the city seemed to agree that no further transfers should go forward until humanitarian standards improved. Yet the city continues to transfer IDPs to Mampang.

Several aid providers – not only in Zamboanga, but also in the national capital, Manila – expressed their concern that, in light of the poor humanitarian conditions at Mampang, allowing further IDP transfers to go forward contravenes the humanitarian “do no harm” principle. As a representative of one humanitarian agency involved in Mampang put it, “It’s hard to say whether the protection issues in the transitional sites are worse than they were in the evacuation centers.” Aid providers with whom RI spoke were concerned that they may be seen as complicit in allowing IDPs to be transferred to a site where conditions are well below humanitarian standards. They fear that conditions will only get worse as more people are sent to Mampang and existing problems are not addressed.

RI interviewed numerous IDPs at the Sports Complex who said that they preferred to stay at the Sports Complex rather than go to Mampang. However, they felt they had no choice in the matter, thereby raising serious questions as to whether such movements would be consensual as required under Philippine and international law. Given the limited time remaining, it may prove impossible for Zamboanga city authorities to clear the Sports Complex by December 15. However, without persistent pressure from the international community and donors, it is likely that the city will go forward with transfers in the coming weeks and months.

The poor humanitarian conditions in Zamboanga can be traced in part to August 2014, when the national government declared an “end” to the humanitarian phase of the Zamboanga crisis. Following that announcement, the humanitarian presence in Zamboanga has only diminished. Several key humanitarian agencies have left or scaled back operations and today, only one international humanitarian worker – a representative of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) – is present in the city. At present, there are no plans to replace the staffers who have left, although IOM has

stated that it intends to temporarily relocate an international staff person to Zamboanga – a highly welcome development.

It could be argued that the security situation in Zamboanga, including the targeting of foreigners by terrorist organizations like Abu Sayyaf, has deterred UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) from placing more international staff on the ground in Zamboanga. Yet at a time when humanitarian agencies in Zamboanga remain under intense pressure from the government, and must navigate what are undoubtedly some politically-sensitive issues, a strong international presence on the ground is of utmost importance. Certainly, there are many highly-capable, forceful national humanitarian staff in Zamboanga. But appropriately qualified and experienced international staff are likely to possess a greater degree of independence – a sentiment shared by several national staff with whom RI spoke.

RIGHT TO RETURN

“Every time I look out in the distance to the sea, I start crying because it reminds me of my home.”

–Displaced Bajau mother residing at Mampang transitional site

Given the situation in which many of the IDPs now find themselves, it is no surprise that their main desire is to return to their home areas and resume their maritime lifestyles. However, most have not been able to return because the local government has declared their former neighborhoods “no return” areas or “no build zones.” In addition, the city government is taking the view that some IDPs are not “legitimate,” asserting that they were not displaced by the conflict but rather went to ECs to take advantage of humanitarian aid. This is contradicted by Ateneo de Zamboanga University Research Center’s livelihoods survey which indicated that 77 percent of those displaced in September 2013 have been living in Zamboanga for more than 20 years. As one IDP at Mampang told RI, “We would really like to go back to our place of origin. There is clean water and we can fish to our heart’s content. It was where I was born.”

Whereas 10,000 homes were destroyed during the siege in September, the city’s recovery plan envisions the construction of 7,000 permanent homes reserved for those who can demonstrate that they owned their home and that it was completely destroyed. It is unclear where the remaining 3,000 IDP households – undoubtedly the poorest – are supposed to go, not to mention the thousands of IDPs who were living as tenants or informal settlers and have no claim to land.

When asked the basis upon which IDPs were being denied the right to return, city officials gave different answers. Some said that the areas are environmentally protected, an assertion that has been disputed by the Philippine Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and the Department of Natural Resources. Other city officials said that the areas present a security risk since they are located on the seafront where the rebel groups landed to launch their attack. However, it was unclear what national legislation applied in this case and upon what basis the “no return”/“no build” determination was made.

This is not the first time the Philippine government has used “no build” designations to prevent IDPs from returning to their home areas. Following Typhoon Haiyan, the national government sought to enforce a “no build” policy and prohibit informal settlers from rebuilding in areas along the coast where they formerly lived. Due, however, to concerns that the policy did not comport with national law or international human rights principles regarding forced evictions and resettlement, both the CHR and the humanitarian Shelter Cluster engaged in advocacy aimed at ensuring that any resettlement that was legitimately necessary adhered to national and international law and human rights principles.¹ Thereafter, the national government revised the policy. “No build zones” in typhoon-affected regions were replaced by “unsafe areas” that are determined based on hazard mapping. In addition, guidance was put in place recommending that relocation/resettlement be undertaken with a holistic perspective that considers not only the shelter needs of IDPs, but also their social and economic needs, and in a manner that respects the rights of all affected persons; in other words, “that the relocation is undertaken utilizing an approach that has the best possible chance of succeeding.”²

As was the case after Typhoon Haiyan, the remaining IDPs in Zamboanga are primarily informal settlers, who cannot demonstrate that they owned the land on which they formerly lived. There is also a question as to whether their relocation is voluntary. It is true that some members of the UN humanitarian country team (UN HCT) have been openly pushing the local government to allow more returns, and as a result, some families have been or will be allowed to go back. Nonetheless, in light of the significant amount of time and effort that UN HCT members put into protecting informal settlers facing eviction in the case of Haiyan, RI was surprised that the UN HCT and donors had not taken a more assertive stance on the right of the displaced Bajau and Tausaug minority groups to return, especially since they are indigenous ethnic minorities that have long been discriminated against, and who in some ways are more vulnerable even than Haiyan survivors.

NEED FOR A PROACTIVE APPROACH

The woeful humanitarian conditions that Zamboanga’s IDPs have been forced to endure – both in the ECs and at the transitional sites to which they are being transferred – are well known to members of the UN HCT in Manila and have been for some time. It is also true that many of the obstacles to providing durable solutions for the IDPs are tied up in national and local political issues, over which international humanitarian agencies have limited control. These include a lack of available land with access to utilities and services, the city’s legitimate need to decongest IDPs’ former neighborhoods, and its need to secure parts of the city’s coastline from infiltration by armed actors.

Yet, more than one year on, it is obvious that attempts to remotely manage the situation in Zamboanga have been unsuccessful. The recent decision by the UN HCT in Manila to form a working group to address the situation has met with lukewarm enthusiasm from some HCT members already resigned to its failure. Now that the country has been hit with yet another major typhoon, Hagupit, the risk is higher than ever that Zamboanga’s IDPs will be neglected once more.

Heading into 2015, when the plebiscite on Bangsamoro is scheduled to go forward and at a time when the region’s peace process hangs in the balance, this crisis can no longer be ignored. As one humanitarian actor aptly expressed it, “2015 is the year that will either make or break Mindanao.” At this critical time, it would be a mistake for UN agencies and donors to allow the humanitarian neglect of minority Muslim IDPs to fester. Doing so would provide fodder for those who do not want peace and those who want to limit the geographic and political sphere of an autonomous Bangsamoro region. Rather, what is needed is strong national government, UN, and donor leadership in steering the response in the context of the larger peace process.

In order to effectively address the situation in Zamboanga, both short- and longer-term measures must be implemented. First, in the immediate term, no further transfers of IDPs to Mampang should be undertaken until humanitarian standards acceptable to the UN HCT are met and the WASH, health, nutrition, education, and livelihood issues at transitional sites are addressed. The humanitarian community has managed to find solutions to far more complex problems in many other regions of the world, suggesting that what may be lacking in Zamboanga is focus and determination.

Therefore, UN agency headquarters in Geneva and New York, as well as INGO leaders, must ensure that their

Philippine offices have the resources that are needed to promptly respond to the crisis. This must include funding for the deployment to Zamboanga of appropriately qualified and experienced international staff capable of balancing the need to independently advocate on behalf of IDPs with the need to forge a constructive, working relationship with the local government. Occasional visits by high-level staff have clearly been ineffective. An on-the-ground presence and daily focus on overcoming current challenges will be required if durable solutions are to be achieved.

At the same time, the national government should fulfill its obligations to Zamboanga's IDPs both as a humanitarian matter and as a priority for peace and reconciliation. IDPs' rights under national and international law must be met, especially as relate to return, relocation, and resettlement, and their human rights fully respected. The government must also provide local government officials with the requisite financial resources to address the IDPs' immediate humanitarian needs and sustainably incorporate them into the city's social and economic development. For its part, the Zamboanga City government must immediately halt any further transfers of IDPs to transitional sites until and unless adequate humanitarian standards are met. To the extent services at the transitional sites are adequately improved, the city must also ensure that any transfers that do occur are entirely voluntary and based on the IDPs' full and informed consent.

Donors, for their part, must provide additional humanitarian and development funding for Zamboanga's IDPs. Relatively small financial and staff outlays would go a long way toward an effective response. The Zamboanga Action Plan (September 2013 – September 2014) requested just \$12.8 million for the humanitarian response. Only 45 percent of that was funded. Several agencies with whom RI spoke expressed frustration that headquarters or donors had not allowed them to use funding leftover from the Haiyan response to address the situation in Zamboanga. Indeed, after the recent damage caused by Typhoon Hagupit, it is likely that residual funds will be consumed by needs there. Given that some donors are providing both humanitarian and development assistance, it is recommended that donors form a Zamboanga donors' group to work with humanitarian and development partners to address the crisis.

Finally, the UNHCR and the UN Development Program (UNDP), with strong donor support, must immediately put their diplomatic and financial muscle behind winning national and local government support for an effective, durable solutions strategy; one that sees IDPs not as a problem, but as an opportunity to promote peace and reconciliation in Zamboanga. IDPs and host communities

must be included in the rebuilding process in a participatory manner that fosters overall peace and prosperity while allowing the city to address any legitimate urban planning and security concerns. The decision by USAID to select Zamboanga for its Cities Development Initiative, which is aimed at promoting "sustained, more inclusive, and resilient growth," provides a good opportunity to devise an urban recovery and development strategy that is inclusive of those displaced by the conflict.

While the scale of displacement in Zamboanga may seem small in comparison to crises elsewhere in the country, let alone the world, 2015 will be a critical time. Addressing humanitarian and recovery needs and finding durable solutions for Zamboanga's IDPs must be seen as part of the overall process of peace and reconciliation in Mindanao. Not doing so risks the further neglect of some of the region's poorest, most marginalized, and most vulnerable people.

Alice Thomas traveled to the Philippines in November 2014. She interviewed affected individuals, Philippines and donor government officials, UN officials, representatives of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, international non-government organizations, and local civil society organizations.

1. See Shelter Cluster Philippines. "HLP Guidance Note on Relocation for Shelter Partners." March 2014. See also Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines. "Human Rights Standards on Housing, Land and Property Rights of Populations Affected by Typhoon Yolanda." February 27, 2014.

2. Shelter Cluster HLP Guidance Note. In the case of Haiyan, the shelter cluster advocated for a "settlements approach" wherein resettlement requires the creation of "a safe environment for the entire community where they not only have access to an adequate standard of housing but also to utilities, critical infrastructure and livelihood opportunities. Adopting a settlements perspective involves the consideration of other aspects of community life beyond shelter and how they all fit together physically and functionally."