Philippines: Government’s terrorist-tagging denies right to education to thousands of indigenous Lumad

Around 1,500 indigenous Lumad children and youth were denied their right to education when the Department of Education (DepEd) ordered the closure of 55 Lumad schools in September of this year. DepEd acted on the recommendation of the Vice Chairperson of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, Hermogenes Esperon, Jr.

Esperon, a retired chief of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and currently the country’s National Security Adviser, claimed that the students are taught left-leaning ideologies and trained to be child warriors for the New People’s Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). “As part of their indoctrination process, they are taught a different national anthem and are forced to conduct dramas about indigenous peoples being tortured. To teach them to fight against the government, they are taught how to survive during encounters, how to ambush government forces, how to use firearms, how to recruit other children in the fight against the government, and how to conduct anti-government rallies,” Esperon expounded.

DepEd Secretary, Leonor Briones, insisted that the primary reason for the decision was not due to Esperon’s recommendation but to the non-compliance to DepEd requirements of Salugpungan Ta’Tanu Igkanogon Community Learning Centers (or Salugpungan), the organisation overseeing the Lumad schools. However, Briones, did acknowledge that the investigation her office conducted revealed that Esperon’s claims were not unfounded. She said, “We have knowledge based on our research and from our people, we talked to them personally and we have officially verified some of the initial findings that they [i.e. National Task Force] had.”

During a press conference in July when Briones was explaining her office’ decision of suspension of the 55 Lumad schools, which eventually led to the schools’ closure, she assured the decision will not cause any disruption to the students’ learning. “We have public schools nearby and we asked them to accept these learners and waive documentary requirements to

---

2 https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1141596/deped-heeds-esperon-report-suspends-55-lumad-schools
ensure that their education will continue,” she said. It remains to be seen how far her assurance holds in view of the capacity of the “public schools nearby” to actually address the needs of the learners of the 55 Lumad schools and provide the same quality education as the schools she ordered to be shut down.

Human rights groups and Lumad organisations condemned DepEd’s decision and questioned the investigation of its fact-finding team. They claimed the investigating team failed to visit the schools and did not give Salugpongan a chance to respond to the allegations against them.

The Philippine Commission on Human Rights expressed the same concern as the human rights and Lumad organisations. It called for DepEd to reconsider its decision to close the Lumad schools and advised them to seek an open dialogue with the Lumad communities. It also reiterated that allegations to Lumad schools as breeding ground for rebels should be investigated through proper channels and undergo due process. It reminded the government’s responsibility to uphold the Republic Act No. 11188, or the Special Protection of Children in Situation of Armed Conflict Law, which states that children should be protected from all forms of abuse and violence without compromising their other rights, in this case, the indigenous children’s right to education.

**Implications and related consequences**

The right to education is valuable for the realisation of other rights. Thus, the government’s denial to this right is comparable to refusing the Lumad children and youth the opportunity to learn more about their culture and their environment, as well as how to preserve and defend them. Furthermore, DepEd’s decision to close the schools that cater to the Lumad’s own education and social context denies the Lumad communities their right to self-determination, as well as negates its own department orders No. 62, s. 2011 entitled Adopting the National Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Policy Framework and No. 32, s. 2015 entitled Adopting the Indigenous Peoples Education Curriculum Framework.

The teachers volunteering for the Lumad schools shared in an online platform that their day is packed with typical activities as any other schools but with particular focus on indigenous struggles, folklores, music and games. They teach formal classes in English, Math, Science, Values, Social Studies, Filipino, and History, and also integrate agriculture, sewing and carpentry in the curriculum. “Our curriculum is based on DepEd’s K to 12 indigenous education guidelines and is designed to be critical [and] culture-sensitive (sic),” one teacher clarified.

The Lumad schools, like Salugpongan, were built by the Lumad community themselves within their own ancestral land with the help of other organisations. These schools help address the government’s failure to provide schools in remote areas where most of Lumad communities reside.

A network of child rights advocates, Save Our Schools (SOS) Network, shared that Salugpongan is just one of the 12 organisations in Mindanao that provide schools for these children. The 55 Lumad schools were not the only ones that were forced to stop its operation. SOS Network’s record shows a total of 153 schools having to close due to increased militarisation in the island affecting a total of 4,000 indigenous children and youth. Furthermore, these organisations, like the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines – Northern Mindanao sub-

---

Region (RMP-NMR), who is also administering 15 Lumad schools, are being vilified through similar allegations of having communist leaning and relations to the NPA. These allegations, often put forward without due process and proper investigation, compromise the organisations’ safety and security to provide support to the communities.

The inability of the government to ensure the Lumad children and youth to study in peace contributes to the current low literacy levels of indigenous Lumad, which further exacerbates their vulnerability and marginalisation. It is estimated that 9 out of 10 Lumad children have no access to education.

An Ongoing Agony
Even under former President Benigno Aquino III, the Lumad schools have been suffering from killings and attacks from paramilitaries believed to have ties with the government military. This situation turned for the worse as the current President Rodrigo Duterte turned his back from his rhetoric of support to indigenous peoples during his campaign and at the beginning of his administration in 2016.

Just a year after he took office, he threatened to bomb the Lumad schools. "Umalis kayo diyan. Sabihin ko diyan sa mga Lumad ngayon, umalis kayo diyan. Bobombahan ko 'yan. Isali ko 'yang mga istruktura ninyo," he said. [Translation: Leave. I'm telling those in the Lumad schools now, get out. I'll bomb you. I'll include your structures.] "I will use the Armed Forces, the Philippine Air Force. Talagang bobombahan ko 'yung mga... lalat ng ano ninyo [Translation: I will really bomb all of it]. Because you are operating illegally and you are teaching the children to rebel against government," he added.

The President’s view parallels those of Esperon’s whom he appointed as the country’s security adviser at the early stage of his administration.

In 2017, the island of Mindanao where these Lumad schools are located was declared under Martial Law. The Martial Law declaration was as a response to the siege of Marawi City of a group claiming to be operating under the banner of ISIS. But despite the city’s liberation from the terrorist group in October 2017, Martial Law was extended until the end of 2019. The President claimed that the rebellion from other terrorists like the NPA, among others, threaten the public safety of Mindanao. He said the extension “will enable the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines), the PNP (Philippine National Police), and all other law enforcement agencies to finally put an end to the ongoing rebellion in Mindanao and continue to prevent the same from escalating in other parts of the country.”

“Og eskwela a puron” is the Manobo phrase for “To school I wish,” which embodies the aspiration of Lumad children to attain education that will help uplift their communities. For them, education is the key for the development of their communities and culture.

But with the extension of Martial Law in Mindanao until 31 December 2019, thousands of Lumad lives are at risk, and so is the education of the Lumad children. It is for this reason that Og Eskwela A Puron is this year’s campaign, to support the Lumad schools through ‘Bakwit School,’ an alternative learning venue that enables the Lumad evacuees, especially the Lumad children to continue with their formal schooling even while staging a protest encampment.

The Bakwit School also aims to highlight the demands of the Lumad people to end the military attacks in their schools and communities and to end Martial Law, including President Duterte’s all-out war in Mindanao.

-MESSAGE FROM SAVE OUR SCHOOLS (SOs) NETWORK

But instead of safety, the Martial Law further endangered not only the schools but the life of indigenous Lumad living in the island. According to SOS Network, prior to the declaration of Martial Law, there have been 87 attacks to the Lumad communities, including their schools. These attacks increased to 584 after the island was put under Martial Law.

SOS Network’s data covers 1 July 2016 to 22 May 2017 for the period before Martial Law while the period after Martial Law covers 23 May 2017 to October 2019.

They also documented the number of victims for each incident. Their data shows the number of victims in most of the incidents has significantly increased after the Martial Law declaration.

Martial Law and increased militarisation in Mindanao do not pose any bright future for the Lumad children and youth, and the rest of the members of their communities. The closure of the Lumad schools is just one of the indications of the current administration’s failure to comply with their responsibility to promote and protect the rights of its indigenous Lumads.