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Editorial by Jean-Daniel Tauxe
Head of Delegation

Not so long ago, nearly half a million people in Central Mindanao hurriedly left their homes to escape a sudden outburst of violence between government troops and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Many of the elderly, women and children who fled had chosen to keep their lives over their belongings. They sought refuge from nearby and far-flung communities as gunfire and bombs exploded in their midst.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, along with the Philippine Red Cross and other governmental and non-governmental agencies, organized the first humanitarian response to the newly displaced by distributing relief goods, installing water systems and latrines, and supporting neighboring health facilities.

Two years have passed since then. Most of the displaced families have progressively gone back following the ceasefire in July 2009. However, for those who lost their houses and farms during the conflict, evacuation centers and host barangays have remained the only place to stay.

Resuming a normal life, recreating sustainable means of subsistence under these circumstances is a long and winding road. Though help is there, the IDPs are depending mainly on donations because their sources of livelihood have been, if not destroyed, at least largely affected. Access to clean water and sanitation remains a concern.

"When we evacuated, it was a tough time... my little child was the only one that I brought with me. Our house was burnt already. So we cannot return... until now we cannot go home," Tayan Mawgan, a mother of four, told us recently.

Two years after, they still struggle to survive and return to normalcy.

The ICRC remains committed to assist the most vulnerable people in Central Mindanao. While blanket distribution of food and household items have come to an end, the ICRC has embarked to a more sustainable approach—combining direct assistance, including food, for a selected number of vulnerable families and programs that might be of benefit to affected communities as a whole, such as the release of fingerlings or the distribution of fishing and farming tools.

The ICRC also started training sessions to teach best practices to about 350 farmers and fishermen who are then expected to pass on their learnings to their fellow workers. Various initiatives, such as distributions of rice and vegetable seeds, as well as basic tools, will help approximately 3,000 vulnerable families to restart their household activities.

Several projects to improve access to water, sanitation, and health facilities have been completed for both displaced and resident communities in Central Mindanao, benefiting some 35,000 people. Support through provision of medicines also continues for hospitals in the southern region. More projects are ongoing and will be pursued in 2011.

Though the ICRC strives to alleviate the plight of civilians affected by armed conflicts, it also endeavors to prevent the suffering. The organization continues to promote knowledge of and respect for international humanitarian law to soldiers and other weapon bearers, and it has also included the training of police officers whose roles have become more diverse.

Visiting persons detained in relation to armed conflict and situations of violence remains the backbone of ICRC operations in the Philippines, with ICRC following up on about 600 individual cases annually. With the expansion of the Call for Action process to address structural problems in the country's jails in Visayas and Mindanao, the inmates in selected jails are bound to benefit from the changes to infrastructure, legal process, and treatment of tuberculosis in detention facilities.

Across the country, the humanitarian consequences of the conflict between the government and the New People's Army remain a concern for the ICRC. Over the years, cycles of violence linked with insurgency has resulted in casualties, displacement and a prevailing state of fear and insecurity among affected communities. The ICRC strives to promote respect for the civilian population with both parties. It provides assistance in remote areas by improving access to water to thousands of people in Negros and Samar and distributing seeds and tools to the most vulnerable.

The ICRC's operations nowadays are no less relevant than during the recent crisis in Central Mindanao. Though the situation keeps evolving, one thing remains unchanged—the ICRC will always be there to support relentlessly the victims of armed conflict.



ICRC

WORKING TOWARDS HEALTH AND DIGNITY IN OVERCROWDED PLACES OF DETENTION

Throughout decades of internal armed conflicts in the Philippines, the ICRC has been visiting persons deprived of liberty and assisting people in need. In cooperation with the national authorities, the ICRC has launched the “Call for Action” plan to address legal and procedural problems leading to overcrowding in jails, concerns regarding inmate health, in particular the spread of tuberculosis, and poor living conditions.

Through this process, the ICRC aims to mobilize concerned government agencies to respond to humanitarian issues observed in jails throughout the country. Jean-Daniel Tauxe, head of the ICRC delegation in the Philippines, explains the objectives of the organization’s latest mobilization efforts.

Knowing that overcrowding in detention facilities is a global problem, what makes the case of the Philippines special?

Overcrowding is a very serious problem in the Philippines, where some detention facilities already exceed their capacity seven times. According to the one of the executive authorities in charge at the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), the jail population is rising about 2.9 percent annually.

In order to tackle the problem of overcrowding, its underlying causes and its effects need to be understood. For example, we have noticed that due to the complexity of the criminal justice system, people can remain in detention without being sentenced beyond their maximum penalty term. This aggravates the overcrowding, which affects inmates’ living conditions and access to basic services, such as water, sanitation and health care. While improvement in material conditions is important, we need to bring judicial, legislative and executive stakeholders on board to tackle underlying issues.

What is new about ICRC’s Call for Action process in the Philippines?

It allows us to complement ICRC’s detention visits by acting as a facilitator between national stakeholders in bringing structural changes for the benefit of all inmates. For decades in the Philippines, we have had unrestricted access to persons detained in relation to internal armed conflicts. While constant dialogue and actions taken addressed the immediate individual needs of inmates, the core problem of jail congestion remained unresolved.

In 2007, we launched the Call for Action, a process to achieve nationwide changes in places of detention. To date, we have seen impressive progress in pilot sites and were positively surprised by the response we received. The call comes from the ICRC; it is the



Jean-Daniel Tauxe, head of the ICRC delegation in the Philippines, speaks about addressing overcrowding in jails through the Call for Action process.

BJMP as well as other concerned stakeholders like DOH or DOJ who take action to tackle the issue.

I should say that the achievements to date are remarkable, given the time frame and the number of agencies involved.

How does this process work?

Bringing together influential members of the executive, legislative and judiciary is a key mechanism of the Call for Action process. The ICRC is acting as a facilitator in three “working groups,” focusing on the three main concerns of inmates: upgrading penal facilities, tuberculosis management in jails, and the need to improve the criminal justice process for inmates.

A pilot project in the Manila City Jail demonstrated that through information sharing and working together on concrete challenges linked to processing the cases of inmates, we can find solutions. Since September 2009, 250 legal cases were identified by the working group, and 130 were resolved to date. This strategy will expand with the authorities to include other jails this year, and hopefully, continue.

The National Tuberculosis Program, which is one of the best in the region, was not adequately accessible to inmates in most jails and prisons. With ICRC’s support, it has now been fully implemented in seven pilot jails and prisons, involving 30,000 inmates. National coverage is expected to be achieved by 2011 for the Bureau of Corrections facilities and by 2015 for the BJMP jails.

Rehabilitation projects, meanwhile, have benefited more than 12,000 inmates in 31 jails. Over 60 BJMP specialists were trained in internationally recognized standards relating to water, sanitation, hygiene and living conditions generally in jails.

Does “Call for Action” open new opportunities for the ICRC?

I believe the Call for Action shows how we can find a way of being a more useful organization, rather than pointing fingers at what is wrong with the system. It combines our knowledge and understanding of the environment with the needs of the country.

How can we ensure the sustainability of the project?

The engagement of the Philippine authorities in the process has been remarkable. All the members of the working groups showed outstanding commitment.

We still have to see what the future will bring. Overcrowding is the issue we want to address. The commitment of the BJMP and other stakeholders is the key criterion of success. The ICRC's role as a facilitator is a tool for this process. Without all these elements put together, the project will not work.



A detainee from the New Bilibid Prison receives his daily dose of medicines to combat tuberculosis. The ICRC works with the NBP to address TB in prisons through the Call for Action process.

Detention activities

The ICRC monitors the living conditions and treatment of those detained due to the country's internal armed conflicts. In addition, ICRC's Call for Action process aims to achieve structural improvements for the benefit of the entire population of inmates.

From January to August 2010, ICRC teams have:

- carried out 184 visits to over 43,000 inmates held in 135 places of detention;
- monitored individually 495 inmates;
- worked together with the Philippine Red Cross to enable 235 inmates to receive visits from family members;
- trained 35 BJMP engineers and management staff on minimum recognized standards on living conditions regarding water, sanitation, hygiene and habitat in jails;
- launched technical projects benefiting 12,900 inmates in 31 jails for the improvement of safe water supply, treatment of wastewater, ventilation, sleeping facilities, conditions of kitchens and infirmaries;
- in cooperation with the Department of Health, the BJMP, the Bureau of Corrections and the Philippine Tuberculosis Society, worked to achieve implementation of the National Tuberculosis Program in seven pilot jails and prisons;
- provided two jails and a prison with laboratory supplies and equipment to support their TB control activities.

IN BRIEF

International humanitarian law training for instructors of the Command and General Staff College (CGSC)

In June, the ICRC in cooperation with the AFP Human Rights Office organized the training of 19 officers from the training institutions within CGSC and associated schools. The training lasted for five days, where participants discussed various aspects of international humanitarian law linked with the conduct of hostilities, use of weapons, command responsibility and sanctions for violations of IHL.

In his welcome speech, Maj. Gen. Victor Felix stressed the need to train AFP personnel in accordance with IHL principles so they could carry out their duties and responsibilities in a professional and diligent manner and in accordance with the law. In December, newly trained instructors will support the organization of a similar course in Army Training and Doctrine Command.

Launching of IHL handbooks for the AFP

On the occasion of IHL day on 12 August, the "Code of Conduct of Combatants" and "Law of Armed Conflict Essentials for Commanders" were launched at the AFP Commissioned Officers

Club. The AFP Chief of Staff, Gen. Ricardo David Jr., assisted by ICRC head of delegation Jean-Daniel Tauxe, led the distribution of the manuals to a platoon of AFP personnel. Gen. David issued a directive to utilize the IHL manuals in every AFP training institution and for the same to be taught to frontline soldiers and officers weekly. The same event also launched the "Human Rights and IHL Manual for AFP Soldiers." The manual will undergo field testing for a month before it is officially published.

Senior police and military officers trained on international policing standards

Workshops on international policing standards were organized for the senior police officers of the Philippine National Police (PNP) in Luzon and Mindanao. Participants from Regions 1, 2 and 3, and the Cordillera Administrative Region, joined the workshop in La Union in August, while policemen from Zamboanga City peninsula, Sulu, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi gathered in Zamboanga in September.

The participants were briefed on international rules on arrests, detention, use of force, firearms, public order management and riot control. The workshop provided an opportunity for PNP and AFP officers to exchange ideas, challenges, and best practices in the field of law enforcement. Participants also discussed the basics of international humanitarian law (IHL) or the law of armed conflict, and human rights.



"Ticketing" is conducted by the ICRC before giving food assistance to vulnerable families in Maguindanao. Here, field officer Janeth Idolog prepares a ticket for an identified beneficiary in Guindulungan.

FROM THE FIELD

When I was asked to go to Cotabato, I was excited but somewhat apprehensive. Safety remains a concern in that area, and being from Manila meant I had limited perspective about the real situation there. But the former journalist in me emerged, and I could not help but be eager about what I would learn and experience.

On my first step at the Cotabato airport (which is actually in Awang, Maguindanao), I immediately saw uniformed soldiers roaming around—something you would not normally see in the metro cities. But it was no cause for alarm because aside from ensuring security, the officers were obviously there because their camp was just beside the airport!

Then onto the ICRC vehicle, where we rode 20 minutes to get to the ICRC office in Cotabato City. I met our energetic head of office Ellen, and worked my way in to meet other colleagues. I was to tag along the ICRC Ecosec (economic security) team as they do the "ticketing"—or distribution of cards to identified beneficiaries of assistance—in Guindulungan, Talayan and Datu Anggal in Maguindanao.

Ticketing is an essential—and difficult—part of the distribution process, which targets the most vulnerable people in need of assistance. Those without tickets will be unable to obtain the specified form of support from ICRC.

During this phase of assistance, that started in September, the ICRC distributed rice and vegetable seeds, as well as tools to approximately 3,000 vulnerable families to help them restart household activities.

Thanks to advice from field officer Kip, I was well equipped for the field—cap, shades, sunblock and clothes (T-shirt, cargo pants, rubber shoes). All ready for work in the field!

Ticketing at Guindulungan, Maguindanao

At past 8 a.m., two vehicles with the ICRC Ecosec team and a handful of volunteers from the Philippine Red Cross (PRC) -

Cotabato chapter left for Guindulungan. Along the highway, we stopped to conduct interviews in several makeshift huts where some of the displaced lived, so they may be included in the planned distribution.

The interviews are part of the assessment phase. They are conducted to identify beneficiaries and the extent of their needs. For this phase, the ICRC is targeting the most vulnerable families—those who were displaced and had difficulty returning to normalcy.

We arrived in Guindulungan around 11 a.m. Here there are rows of small nipa huts, which were apparently built by the provincial government to accommodate evacuees. We settled near an elementary school, and the PRC volunteers (who were also involved from the very beginning) immediately organized the lines.

Under the heat of the sun, women clad in their Muslim dress and men waited to receive their tickets. Old women and mothers carrying their children also patiently lined up. The process of giving tickets has been improved through time, so safeguards are in place to ensure their correct identities.

Ticketing, however, is long and arduous as not all people who line up are part of the list. ICRC's seasoned field officers like Friday patiently explained why some will receive assistance and some won't. He has to get the ICRC's message clear—as a neutral and impartial organization, it does not discriminate, but it does make sure that it assists those who really need it.

The actual distribution itself poses many challenges. Unlike what I had perceived—that giving away these goods is as easy as handing a Christmas gift—a process is followed to ensure an effective way of distribution. Challenges include safeguarding the items, coordinating with the local government or barangay, implementing a convenient but clear-cut method, and reconciling the inventory. Bottom line: the beneficiaries should be able to receive what has been allotted for them. No more, no less.

Unfortunately I was no longer in Cotabato to witness the actual distribution of the seeds and tools for farming which began on the third week of September. I'm sure though that it put smiles on the faces of those women and men who continue to struggle from having been uprooted from their places of origin. It's the assistance team's ultimate consolation, and inspiration, to be of service in the best way they could.

Allison Lopez



Allison Lopez/ICRC

Farmers who were severely affected by the drought in Ifugao province received sacks of corn seeds and fertilizers from the ICRC.

Food and basic necessities for most vulnerable populations

ICRC provides assistance to the most vulnerable people affected by internal armed conflicts.

From January to August 2010, ICRC beneficiaries:

- 29,268 families in Central Mindanao received food and essential household items in the final round of distribution in March;
- over 7,100 families from 25 barangays in Ifugao province were assisted with food and amongst them 2,400 were provided with maize seeds and fertilizer;
- 620 households received a half-monthly food ration in Datu Blah Sinsuat municipality (Sultan Kudarat) in cooperation with PRC Cotabato;
- 550 households affected by fire and forced to flee their homes received tarpaulins, jerry cans and mats in Agusan del Norte in cooperation with PRC Butuan;
- 270 families received a half-monthly food ration, laundry soap and jerry cans

in Sultan sa Barongis, Maguindanao, in cooperation with the local PRC chapter;

- 100 household victims of storm surge received essential household items in Siasi municipality in Sulu in cooperation with PRC Jolo;
- 236 displaced households from Surigao del Sur received half-monthly food ration and hygiene kits, in cooperation with local PRC chapter.

The capacity of the Philippine Red Cross to provide relief and economic security has been reinforced through the training of 58 volunteers.

Water and habitat services for displaced people and resident communities

Access to safe water and proper sanitation is vital to any community. Since the beginning of the year, over 46,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and resident communities have benefited from ICRC technical projects for the improvement of water sources and construction of sanitation facilities in evacuation centers. In Central Mindanao, the ICRC:

- has completed water distribution networks in the barangays of Nes and Libungan Toretta in North Cotabato; installed 49 hand pumps in Libutan, Maguindanao;
- completed the structural rehabilitation of five rural health units and one barangay Health Center in Maguindanao and North Cotabato, and launched the rehabilitation of the orthopaedic Davao Jubilee Center.

In the conflict-affected areas of the Visayas region, the ICRC has been improving access to safe water and sanitation for over 6,600 residents through the construction of two new gravity-fed water supply systems. All water and sanitation projects have been implemented in coordination with the local authorities.



Didier Revo/ICRC

Residents of Mabini, Samar, worked hand-in-hand with the ICRC's engineers to create access to clean drinking water for the community.

IN BRIEF

Supporting the PRC's capacity in disaster response

Four water-supply kits for emergencies were recently donated by the ICRC to the Philippine Red Cross (PRC), as part of continuing efforts to support the national society's capacity to respond to natural disasters.

Each kit can purify raw water into safe drinking water—supplying liters for up to 10,000 people, said Andres Casal, the ICRC's water and habitat coordinator. A water-supply set includes a pump, water treatment unit, storage bladders and tap stands for distribution.

"One of the first problems you have to address during a disaster is access to drinking water because in most cases, the structures attached to drinking water are damaged. The high concentrations of people in one place also leads to degradation of sanitary conditions, so you have to ensure water of good quality and quantity," said Casal.

The Philippines, he pointed out, is extremely prone to disasters especially now that it is experiencing the rainy season.

"With the kits in place, trained PRC volunteers would be able to install them in as short as half a day. These kits will be stored by PRC chapters in Dagupan, Legazpi, Bacolod and Tacloban cities until such time that it is needed by the population," he said, adding that water-supply kits have also been prepositioned in Mindanao.

He said the donation, along with this year's training of around 70 PRC volunteers on water and sanitation, were aimed at enhancing disaster response since the experience of Tropical Storm Ondoy in 2009.

The trainings conducted by ICRC engineers will ensure that identified PRC volunteers would know how to install, operate and maintain water and sanitation facilities during emergency situations.

Over a hundred volunteers have undergone water and sanitation training since 2006, according to Iris Von Birgelen, the ICRC delegate in charge of cooperation with PRC.

Though the ICRC's task consists mainly in serving people affected by armed conflict, Von Birgelen stressed that the organization is prepared to support and work with the PRC during major natural disasters, particularly in the areas of water and sanitation and restoring family links.

HELPING RESIDENTS AND DISPLACED ALIKE



Thanks to improved medical facilities and supplies, midwife Rachma Usman is able to help more families in Central Mindanao with their health concerns.

If Rachma Usman runs for president, she would surely get votes from the villagers of Libungan Torreta in Pigcawayan, North Cotabato. That is because Rachma is the only primary healthcare specialist in this remote rural area in Central Mindanao serving the medical needs of residents and the internally displaced.

She had been working as a midwife here for the last seven years, attending primarily to the prenatal needs of pregnant women as well as children below five years of age. As the lone midwife for five different villages in Cotabato, she also makes it a point to service patients suffering from various ailments.

"They come here for consultation and we respond to them," said Rachma in an interview with ICRC. However, medical response was not easy due to lack of medicines and adequate facilities, a common problem in many distant barrios in the Philippines.

When fighting between state armed forces and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front erupted in August 2008, more than 500,000 people were displaced. Rural health units were overwhelmed by the sheer number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) requiring immediate medical care. Rachma faced one of her biggest challenges yet: to work where the IDPs are.

"Residents from other villages I had been assigned to sometimes get angry at me because I began spending more time with IDPs," she said. "I told them that we should help our people. They are very vulnerable because they have no money and brought nothing else with them."

With the arrival of numerous new patients, Rachma spent a lot of time creating a master list of all pregnant women and children below five years old. The list was then passed to the nearest rural health unit to effectively assess the changed health

situation and to request the necessary level of medical assistance.

She also administered the vaccination of all children up to 15 years old and distribution of vitamins to children.

ICRC helped renovate the barangay health center and brought in essential medicines and consumables, such as basic antibiotics and syringes for immunization.

"ICRC was really a big help. I thought that having this kind of health station existed only in my dreams," said Rachma.

These days, when the emergency is over, and majority of IDPs have returned to their homes, ICRC's support to the primary health centers is gradually reducing. However, according to Rachma, she is now "100 percent ready" to respond in case of another crisis.

Azineth Guiapal, a displaced mother of three who regularly visits Usman, agrees that the health worker's dedication and service to IDPs over the last two years is invaluable.

"Every time the children or myself or anyone else become sick, we always consult her. At times when the children have diarrhea or fever, we immediately go to the health center for treatment," she said.

Though the situation has stabilized, Azineth prefers to stay at the evacuation center because at Libungan Torreta, their primary health needs are well cared for.

Azineth is tremendously thankful that Rachma is around to assist them. Smiling wide, she said, "If the midwife runs for president, I will surely vote for her."

Oliver Ortega

Improving access to healthcare for vulnerable populations

One of the first vital services that is affected in times of conflict is healthcare. With this in mind, the ICRC health team in Mindanao has kept up with efforts to support health authorities in the area, helping to maintain much-needed care for the displaced and communities. From January to August 2010, ICRC assistance has included:

- equipment, essential medicines and technical support provided to six primary healthcare facilities in Central Mindanao;
- donation of medical and surgical items to eight hospitals caring for the wounded and the sick;
- with the assistance of local social services, individual financial support to cover surgical needs in particularly vulnerable cases;
- facilitation of physical rehabilitation and prosthetic support to over 20 amputees;
- training opportunities for the technical staff of the Davao Jubilee Center, which provided assistance to 37 amputees in the form of facilitation of physical rehabilitation and prosthetics;
- capacity building for civilian and military surgeons working in hospitals located in areas most exposed to violence and fighting.



The ICRC supports several health centers and hospitals in Mindanao through provision of medical and surgical supplies.

“RED CROSS AWARD FOR HUMANITARIAN REPORTING” LAUNCHED

A nationwide media contest to promote humanitarian reporting in the Philippines was launched by the ICRC, in partnership with the Philippine Red Cross (PRC), on August 12, international humanitarian law day.

Titled “Red Cross Award for Humanitarian Reporting 2011,” the competition seeks to recognize stories that best illustrate the humanitarian consequences of armed conflicts.

“This competition hopes to honor journalists who serve as the voice of civilians affected by these clashes. We believe journalists, who use good reportage in underlining the brutal reality of armed conflicts and the need to respect the rules, deserve to be recognized,” said Anastasia Isyuk, ICRC communication coordinator.

The “Red Cross Award for Humanitarian Reporting 2011” is supported by the International News Safety Institute (INSI),

Peace and Conflict Journalism Network-Philippines (Pecojo Phils.), Philippine Association of Communication Educators (PACE), and Rotary Club of Manila (RCM).

The competition is open to all print/online, television and radio journalists who have published or aired insightful news reports, features or documentaries on the outcome of the armed conflict situation in the Philippines.

Deadline for nominations is on March 12, 2011. Out of 32 finalists, the judges will select the awardees whose names will be announced during the regional media conference on May 8, 2011, Red Cross Day.

Winners of the “Red Cross Award for Humanitarian Reporting” will receive various prizes including plaques, gadgets, membership to PRC with accident insurance, books, and the chance to receive trainings on IHL and conflict reporting.

MECHANICS

- Entries must highlight the humanitarian consequences of armed conflicts for affected populations and/or the importance of IHL. The focus could be on displacement, food, water and sanitation, livelihood, and other effects felt by civilians in armed conflict; or how respect for IHL must be promoted. Mere reports of such incidents, blogs, or stories not related to armed conflicts (political killings, human-rights violations) are ineligible.
- There is no limit to the number of entries sent by an individual/organization, or its length, as long as it satisfies the focus of the contest. For print/online, entries must have a hardcopy with link to website, if any. Use Mp3 format for radio and mpeg for TV.
- Articles may be in English, Filipino, or local dialects. Non-English entries must be accompanied with translations/subtitles.

Step 1: Fill up nomination forms available on the websites of partner organizations; while printed copies are available at the PRC chapters.

Step 2: Along with the nomination form and nomination letter from your editor/organization, mail three copies of your entries to the following PACE schools:

- For Northern/Central Luzon: c/o Prof. Ben Domingo, development communication

department, Central Luzon State University, Science City of Munoz, Nueva Ecija

- For NCR/Southern Luzon: c/o Charlton Jules Romero, mass communication department chair, St. Scholastica's College Manila, 2560 Leon Guinto St., Manila
- For Visayas: c/o Francisco Lucero, development communication instructor, Cebu Technological University, R. Palma Street, Cebu City
- For Mindanao: c/o Prof. Shiella Balbutin, development communication department chair, Xavier University, Cagayan de Oro City

TIMELINE

Aug. 12, 2010, IHL Day
Opening of nominations

March 12, 2011
Deadline of submission of entries

April 12, 2011
Selection of 32 finalists

May 8, 2011, Red Cross Day
Announcement of winners during regional media conference on conflict reporting



Photos depicting the brutal realities of war are viewed from the “Our World At War” exhibit, which was launched at the Senate grounds to mark IHL month in August.

“IT MADE ME MORE AWARE OF THE SUFFERING IN CONFLICT...”

I came across the ICRC’s photo exhibit “Our World at War” at a mall in Bacolod, and though I was actually on vacation there, the sheer visual intensity of the photos demanded that I take a serious look. The exhibit pooled together amazing images from five award-winning photographers, and I got the message instantly: that suffering due to war, or at least armed conflict, is still a very real problem.

The exhibit prompted me to write an article about the ICRC and its activities in the Philippines for the newspaper I work for. In my opinion, reporting on issues related to international humanitarian law is a problem of lack of knowledge and of priority. Part of the reason I became so fixated on the exhibit, I think, is that I wasn’t as aware of the consequences of armed conflict as I thought I was.

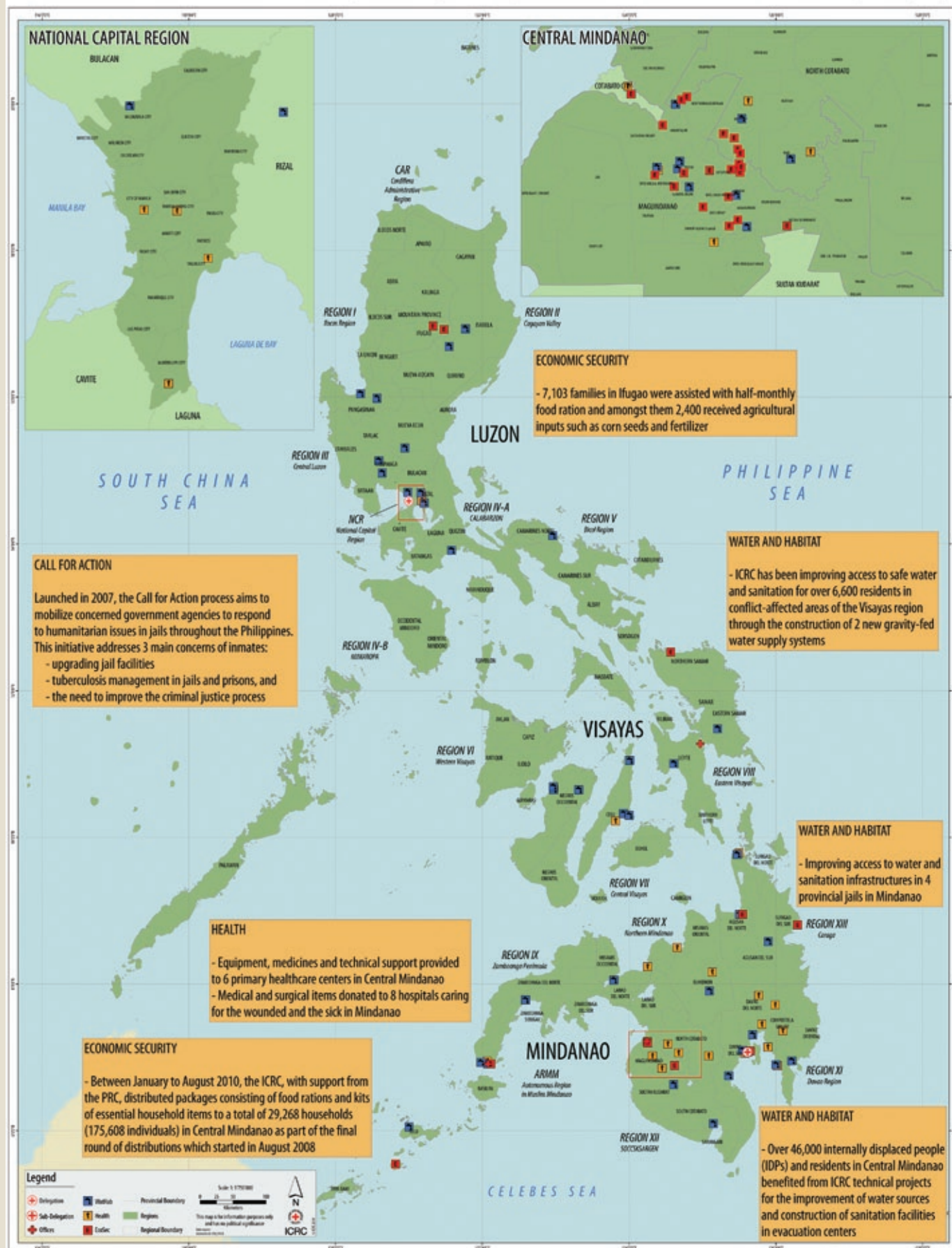
We hear about clashes between authorities and rebels in Mindanao, for instance, but we rarely ever hear about how ordinary lives are affected. In-depth reports are relegated to late-night time slots or not-too-prime pages. This is often a function of mass media having limited space and time. Unfortunately, if we don’t hear about it, we won’t care about it.

A constant presence in media gives off the perception of importance. In media studies, this is called agenda setting. In this case, the importance is not only perceived, but real. Media outfits can tap various forms of new media, especially unlimited cyberspace, to this end. The added emphasis may even catch the attention of do-gooders that want to help out.

Of course, quantity and quality of stories should still go hand-in-hand. The best way for media to assure accuracy is to get to the grassroots, something I look forward to doing in the future.

Jahzeel Abihail G. Cruz

ICRC ASSISTANCE AND CALL FOR ACTION PROGRAMS IN THE PHILIPPINES FOR 2010



International Committee of the Red Cross in the Philippines



Manila
5th Floor Erechem Building
corner Rufino and Salcedo Streets
Legaspi Village, Makati City 1229
T +63 2 892 8901/4
F +63 2 819 5997
Email man_manilla@icrc.org

Davao
4th Floor Central Plaza 1 Building
J.P. Laurel Ave, Bajada 8000
Davao City
T +63 82 222 8870/1
F +63 82 222 8694
Email dav_davao@icrc.org

Cotabato
016 R. Garcia Street
9600 Cotabato City
T +63 64 421 8377 / 55
F +63 64 421 8695
Email cot_cotabato@icrc.org

Tacloban
House 3, Kalipayan Road
Sagkahan District
Tacloban City
T +63 53 321 4431
F +63 53 321 4432
Email tao_tacloban@icrc.org

Zamboanga
2nd Floor, Red Cross Youth Hostel
Pettit Barracks, Zamboanga City 7000
T +63 62 993 2536
F +63 62 990 1560
Email zam_zamboanga@icrc.org