

Statement of Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA)
Delivered by Jacqueline K. Cariño, Vice-Chairperson for External Affairs

Agenda Item 6: Country Engagement

Bakwit is a local term in Mindanao, Philippines meaning to “evacuate.” Indigenous peoples *bakwit* when they are forced to flee their homes, villages, farms and schools for fear of their lives in order to seek sanctuary in other places. Forced evacuation is a common occurrence now, not only in Mindanao but in other regions of the Philippines, due to military operations and martial rule. As reported by Kalumaran in July 2018, 77 incidents of *bakwit* or forced evacuation of Lumad indigenous peoples due to militarization have displaced more than half a million (577,161) individuals in Mindanao alone.

Forced evacuation is something that should never happen in indigenous communities. It is a total dislocation of indigenous peoples from their homelands turning them into internal refugees. It causes extreme hardship and stress for those who have to walk far distances, leaving behind their livelihood and communities. It leads to miserable conditions in temporary evacuation centers such as lack of food and water, cramped living quarters, exposure to weather, unsanitary conditions and illness. It disrupts normal lives and children’s schooling, aggravated by the forced closure of indigenous peoples schools in remote communities. Once they manage to return to their communities after months or even years, they face a heavy task of rehabilitating their abandoned homes and farms.

In the Philippines today, the threat of even more *bakwit* happening is imminent due to the government’s “IP-centric Whole-of-Nation” military operation plan. Named as Oplan Kapayapaan and Oplan Kapanatagan, these counter-insurgency operations are targeting indigenous peoples as though they are terrorists. Indigenous peoples are subjected to harassment, trumped up charges, intimidation, threats, surveillance, vilification, arrest, detention and extra-judicial killings, sowing fear among the people and leading to forced evacuations.

This militaristic approach, coupled with development aggression or the imposition of destructive development projects and extractive industries, is causing wide-scale displacement of indigenous peoples from their ancestral homelands. The repressive political climate and intensified State oppression against indigenous peoples **pose a big challenge to the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines.**

Expert Mechanism advice No. 12 on the causes and consequences of migration and displacement of indigenous peoples **recommends that: “States should ensure that neither their laws nor the abuse of their laws are used to criminalize the work of indigenous human rights defenders and that allegations of abuse are promptly, independently and thoroughly investigated and perpetrators prosecuted.”**

In light of a recent Human Rights Council Resolution to conduct an investigation into human rights violations in the Philippines, we likewise call on the EMRIP to likewise investigate indigenous peoples rights violation, and in particular, to look into State instrumentalities such as the Inter-Agency Committee on Legal Action (IACLA), the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), the military, police and its support paramilitary groups **that are being used to terrorize and criminalize indigenous peoples.**

We further urge the EMRIP to conduct a country engagement the Philippines and to advise the government on how best to respect, protect and fulfill indigenous peoples’ rights. ***