

The Philippines



Quick facts

Number of IDPs	125,000–188,000
Percentage of total population	0.1%–0.2%
Start of current displacement situation	2008
Peak number of IDPs (Year)	500,000 (2009)
New displacement	400,000
Causes of displacement	Internal armed conflict, human rights violations
Human development index	105



Conflict and displacement have been ongoing for at least 30 years in the Philippines. Most recently, in August 2008, renewed fighting between the government and rebels of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the southern region of Mindanao led to the internal displacement of an estimated one million people, before the parties declared a ceasefire in July 2009.

Before this latest surge in fighting, it was estimated that more than two million people across the country had been displaced due to conflict since 2000. Most displacement had taken place in Mindanao; however, it had also been caused by armed encounters throughout the country between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the communist rebel group of the NPA, and by operations against the Abu Sayyaf group in Basilan and Sulu Provinces.

During 2009, the Mindanao conflict was largely concentrated in the majority-Muslim provinces of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), and particularly in Maguindanao Province. There, decades of conflict, displacement, poor governance and development neglect have kept the majority of the population in poverty, with limited access to personal safety or to basic social services.

Low-intensity conflict between the government and the MILF in the early months of the year caused only sporadic and limited displacement, but prevented many people displaced in previous months from returning home. From April onwards the government stepped up its military response, in particular in Maguindanao province where army operations caused massive displacement. Formal peace talks resumed at the end of the year, at which point up to 188,000 people were still displaced in the absence of security guarantees and sufficient assistance.

IDPs have faced many threats to their physical security and integrity, while facing barriers to their enjoyment of the basic necessities of life, education, property, livelihoods and other rights. The common agent of displacement nationwide has been the AFP and its operations against the different insurgencies. Civilians living near areas of fighting have been at risk from shelling and aerial bombardment, including after their displacement. During counter-insurgency operations by the AFP, people have reportedly been harassed, abducted and sometimes killed. In areas known as MILF rebel strongholds, the AFP has come to openly consider IDPs as the “enemy reserve force”.

At the end of 2009, IDPs were either gathered in camps, where they were receiving some national and international support, or dispersed and possibly receiving support from host communities. Many had been living in displacement for 18 months. Away from their farm lands or traditional livelihoods, most IDPs had resorted to daily labour, petty trade and fishing, activities which generated far less income and did not significantly improve their access to food or other basic necessities. Displaced children, many of whom had had their education interrupted by their displacement, were vulnerable to trafficking, recruitment into armed groups, malnutrition and health problems due to their prolonged stay in overcrowded emergency centres.

While the government has generally acknowledged the internal displacement situation, its scale and impact have been insufficiently documented and often played down. The government has so far failed to provide a comprehensive response to the specific problems which IDPs face. Most efforts have gone into providing emergency humanitarian assistance, but have not ensured that the returns which have taken place are safe or offer sustainable livelihood opportunities, or that alternative durable solutions are offered when return is not an option.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) has been the main agency delivering assistance to IDPs, either directly or through other agencies. Coordination, both between government agencies and between them and humanitarian agencies, is largely driven from Manila and has been reported as inadequate. Local NGOs, volunteers and other representatives of civil society, including IDPs themselves, have played a critical role in assisting the internally displaced and in advocating for their rights in Mindanao and elsewhere in the country; nonetheless, many IDPs have relied on the humanitarian assistance provided by international NGOs and agencies such as WFP, IOM or UNDP in the absence of sufficient government assistance.

The absence of a permanent Resident Coordinator to head the UN country team during the conflict period hampered the UN’s humanitarian response. It took more than a year from August 2008 for an IASC protection cluster to be established at the national level. In Mindanao, the Monitoring Working Group (MWG) established in February was replaced six months later by the Protection Working Group (PWG) led by IOM.