

Mindanao (Philippines): ‘Lumad’ protest takes form of real wake

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Indigenous peoples demanding reopening of schools for tribes’ kids bring coffin to DepEd door.



FOR REAL The coffin of “lumad” leader Pakingan Gantangan sits at the main door of the Department of Education office in Koronadal City.—BONG S. SARMIENTO

KORONADAL CITY — “Lumad” demanding the reopening of schools for their children brought their protest to a different level by holding the wake for one of their leaders right at the doorsteps of the Department of Education (DepEd) office here.

Protesters placed the coffin bearing the remains of Pakingan Gantangan, a Dulangan-Manobo leader, at the entrance of the DepEd office.

Gantangan died of cardiac arrest on July 21 at a picket in front of the DepEd office by lumad protesters.

Protesters have set up camp in the area since early this month following the closure of schools for lumad children ordered by the DepEd.

Gantangan’s coffin practically barricaded the DepEd office’s main door, forcing employees and people with transactions with DepEd to use the back door in the last four days.

Lumad camp

The group Center for Lumad Advocacy, Networking and Services Inc. (CLANS) organized what it called “kampuhan,” or camp out, to support the lumad demand for DepEd to give their schools permits to operate.

Gantangan’s wife, Dabao, said her husband’s fervent wish was for lumad schools to continue serving their children.

“We will not go home to our communities until DepEd releases the permits to operate for schools serving the lumads,” Dabao said, recalling Gantangan’s last words before he collapsed and was rushed to a local hospital where he died.

Dabao said lumad left in the protest would continue holding the wake for Gantangan at the entrance of the DepEd office until their daughter, Jolita Tolino, could pay her last respects to Gantangan.

Arrested by Marines

Tolino was a volunteer teacher of a CLANS school in the community of Tinagdanan in the village of Hinalaan, Kalamansig town, Sultan Kudarat province.

She was arrested by Marines early this year on charges of murder and frustrated murder, which lumad leaders said were fabricated.

The school where she taught had been closed by DepEd.

Sadrach Sabella, regional chair of the human rights group Karapatan, urged the local court to order the release of Tolino to allow her to visit her father's wake.

John Timothy Romero, CLANS spokesperson, said protesters would leave the area only after the DepEd granted permits to lumad schools in the provinces of South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat and Sarangani.

He said that at least 4,600 elementary and high school lumad students were displaced by the closure of 33 schools since last year.

Besides not having licenses to operate from the DepEd, local military officials accused the schools of teaching subversion and communism.

Caught in war

Romero denied the schools were being used to propagate communism, although he admitted that New People's Army (NPA) rebels were operating in areas where the schools are.

"We're operating in remote mountain areas where communist rebels have a presence, but that does not mean that we are NPA supporters," he said.

"We are just caught in the war between the military and NPA," he added.

Romero described Gantangan as a hero of the lumad's fight for education.

"Until his last breath, he stood his ground as an advocate for lumad education," Romero said.

Romero said CLANS had been applying for permits to operate since 2014 and had completed all DepEd requirements.

The DepEd, however, added a certificate of ancestral domain title as a requirement for schools to operate, a document which would take years to acquire from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples.

Increasing attacks

He said DepEd did not require the document when CLANS first applied for permits four years ago.

Antonio Maganto, DepEd regional information officer, declined to comment without permission from his bosses.

Romero said the military attacks and harassment against lumad schools and communities in the region worsened after President Duterte last year threatened to bomb lumad schools for allegedly spreading communism.

The Save our Schools Network, a network of nongovernment organizations and Church groups, documented 225 cases of attacks on lumad schools since last year.

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P.S.

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