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UN Official: Peace Treaties Need to Address Indigenous Women

By Michael Astor, Associated Press Writer

Indigenous women are disproportionately the victims of violence in conflict zones and peace treaties must take into account their unique status by including clauses to protect this twice marginalized population, a United Nations special investigator said Tuesday.

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, the U.N. special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people, painted a devastating picture of the plight of indigenous women in conflicts, where fighting often leaves indigenous people caught between opposing armies that tend to disrespect their rights and often use sexual violence as a weapon.

"Rape has been used as a common instrument to weaken the communities and when conflict happens, women are the ones who stay in the communities. I have been to many communities where there are no men left, there are only women and children left and therefore when the military comes it is the women who are the ones who suffer the brunt of their ire," said Tauli-Corpuz, who is also an indigenous leader from the Kankanaey Igorot people of the Philippines

While the situation varies from country to country, Tauli-Corpuz said indigenous people are often accused of siding with insurgents and that when the conflict ends, indigenous people often fear that demobilized guerrillas will return to their areas and violate their land rights.

Speaking at the 15th Session of the U.N.'s Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Tauli-Corpuz said she hoped that in the future peace treaties could include clauses about the rights of women as well as the cultural and land rights of indigenous peoples.

She said treaties should also envision the creation of truth and reconciliation commissions in order to end the impunity that often exists, as well as provide mental health support for victims of violence.

Tauli-Corpuz said that the few examples where indigenous people have been able to protect themselves in the crossfire has usually involved them taking matters into their own hands by kicking out insurgents seeking to occupy their native lands and persuading the army not to set up positions in their territory.

Rosalina Tuyuc, founder of the National Association of Guatemalan Widows, said even when the war ends the problems often don't.

"We women are pushing the culture of peace and not the culture of war because it's not just about militarization. What also affects us is this economic vision of development that does not respect life, Mother Earth or culture. Many of our cultural rights are now being violated three times more than during the armed conflict," Tuyuc said.