PHILIPPINES

It is not the home she wants, but Bai Puti Iskak tries to make the most of life in the Bagan Elementary School Evacuation Centre. She shares the centre with her family and other residents on Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines. Fighting between Government forces and the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) broke out in her village in May 2009. Bai Puti was among those forced to flee, along with her husband and 11 children.

Recalling the pitch-black night when mortar shelling began to hit and destroy community facilities and homes, Bai Puti said there had been no time for a planned departure. “We only managed to bring our clothes, leaving our working animals and other important things behind,” she said. Some 500 families fled the fighting in her rural community in the west of the island.

Tens of thousands of families across Central Mindanao have been displaced since peace talks collapsed between the Government and MILF in August 2008. Some 26,600 families continue to live in evacuation centres and other transitional sites in Maguindanao, North Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat provinces.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is the main agency dealing with the displaced on Mindanao. Working with over $747,000 from CERF, IOM and local partners have provided lumber and nipa palm to construct temporary shelters. Families also received essential items, such as cooking equipment, blankets, and hygiene and medical kits.

Bai Puti said the self-sustenance support she received from IOM made her feel “uplifted and empowered, not always having to depend on external support.” The seeds and tools she received allowed her and her neighbours to set up flourishing backyard gardens where they grow their own food.

In total, humanitarian partners in the Philippines received $3 million to provide assistance to 610,000 people affected by the fighting. As with other CERF-backed operations involving different United Nations agencies, funds have been spread across key sectors on the basis of carefully determined priorities.

UNICEF received $789,000 for health and nutrition services, provision of clean water and child protection. WFP received $700,000 for immediate food assistance. More than $210,000 went to FAO to help restore livelihoods for affected communities and improve food security, while UNFPA received $147,000 for reproductive health care. Some $100,000 went to the United Nations Department of Safety and Security to establish an emergency communications system to help NGOs do their work.

While many families were able to return home towards the end of 2010, the security situation in Mindanao remains fragile. Bai Puti is among those staying on at the evacuation centre for now. She acknowledged life is not easy, but has enjoyed taking on new responsibilities and helping those around her. “Since I became a Camp Coordinator, I have been privileged to help affected families,” she said.