

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said it has intensified its humanitarian aid to about 40,000 people still displaced in Zamboanga City seven months after heavy fighting broke out between government forces and faction of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) that lasted for 21 days.

“Displaced people are still largely dependent on assistance from government and aid organizations,” said Gareth Gleed, in charge of the ICRC’s activities in Zamboanga, in an e-mail to the Philippines News Agency over the week.

“Malnutrition has resulted in children dying from preventable diseases. Supplemental feeding of children under the age of five and support to families with pregnant or lactating women are priorities in the drive to push down malnourishment rates,” Gleed said.

About 40,000 people who lost homes and livelihoods in the fighting have received cash without conditions, giving them the freedom to invest in what they need most. Cash-for-work schemes for about 1,200 displaced people are helping ensure that garbage is collected and disposed of at the Joaquin Enriquez stadium and along Cawa-Cawa shoreline.

“Our aim is to help those who have lost everything regain control of their lives,” Gleed said.

He also said that in different parts of the Philippines, thousands of people affected by fighting need humanitarian assistance.

In Zamboanga City and other parts of Mindanao and the Visayas, the ICRC is helping communities to recover and rebuild amid long-standing cycles of violence and poverty.

For his part, Pascal Mauchle, head of the ICRC delegation in Manila, said the international agency has “launched a major operation with the Philippine Red Cross to assist Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) survivors in Samar, but we have certainly not forgotten the many thousands of people affected by armed conflict elsewhere in the Philippines.”

“We remain committed to helping them, as their needs are also immense,” he added.

Working closely with Philippine Red Cross, the ICRC is maintaining its efforts to improve hygiene and sanitation conditions and access to potable water and health care. It is enhancing the drainage system in the stadium and providing additional latrines.

In Rio Hondo, where nearly 2,000 people have found shelter, the local health station has been renovated.

Other health facilities treating the displaced population in Zamboanga have been given medical supplies to help cope with increased demand.

In addition, financial support is being channeled to the neediest in exchange for work or to help them restart income-generating activities.

Water, health care and livelihoods in Mindanao and the Visayas are also being provided.

In several remote areas of Mindanao and the Visayas, displaced and resident communities already living in poverty are struggling to cope with the added burden of violence and lack of security.

“Communities often rely on farming for survival, so we work with them to implement sustainable projects and improve crop yields,” said Alan Colja, the ICRC’s economic security coordinator in the Philippines. “Our approach is to allow communities to identify their own needs and priorities.”

“For example, when a conflict-stricken community in Guihulngan, Negros Oriental, recently decided that it wanted to boost incomes by expanding its cut-flower business, the ICRC helped

it set up a small cut-flower nursery and provided advice on increasing production.”

In recent months, nearly 20,000 people in the upland municipalities of Magpet and Midsayap, in North Cotabato and Lope de Vega and Las Navas, in Northern Samar, received a variety of seed, farm tools, and training to increase crop production.

In addition to rebuilding livelihoods, the ICRC works to improve access to potable water and health care in isolated villages.

Essential services can be seriously disrupted by lack of security, often because infrastructure falls into disrepair and vital supplies are not delivered.

Where the quality of water has deteriorated, as it has for the 2,000 residents of Marcelo village in Negros Occidental province, ICRC engineers upgrade water supply systems and sanitary facilities, the ICRC pointed out.

To ensure that patients from all sides of the fighting with weapon-caused injuries receive the medical attention they require, the ICRC provides two hospitals in conflict-prone areas of Mindanao with medical supplies, as well as ad hoc financial support.

The ICRC also supports the only centre in Mindanao providing artificial limbs and other devices for the physically disabled, with 12 patients fitted this year, the ICRC said.