MinDA (Mindanao Development Authority) Secretary Emmanuel ‘Manny’ Piñol calls them the “forgotten Filipinos.” A tribal community of 140 families has lived in total isolation in the jungles, their tribe moving within the boundaries of Davao del Norte, Bukidnon, and Agusan del Sur.

Last week, this tribe was reached by members of the government for the first time. Manny Piñol, Davao del Norte governor Edwin Juhabib, Congressman Pantaleon Alvarez, Mayor Tess Timbol, and Major General Ruben Basiao of the Army’s 10th Infantry Division met with the members of the tribe in Kapalong, Davao del Norte.

“The members of the tribe received food supplies from government at a point in the jungle where the road ended, literally,” says Piñol.
The tribal members, Piñol says, then walked back to their village for six hours.

Discovered by the Philippine Army only in February 2019, the Ata-Manobo members lived very deep in the forests bordering the three provinces. Their sustenance included Ata rice, cassava, and *camote*. Children did not go to school, and did not know that there was a government, or understand what government was, or that there was a bigger world outside.
They were discovered when the Army Long Range Patrol were in hot pursuit of New People’s Army members, who operated in the area.

The tribe lived in huts made from tree barks and branches, with leaves as their roof, changed every rainy season. Sometimes, elders would go out into the nearby village to sell fiber harvested from abaca. They would walk for three days to reach a small market in San Fernando, Bukidnon, where their abaca—each one would carry up to 30 kilos on their backs—would be bought for a very low price of P50 per kilo.
“Asin ang pinaka-una namo paliton, asukal, kape ug kung naay mabilin, makapalit mi ug tabako (Salt is the first thing we buy, sugar, coffee, and if there is extra money, tobacco),” the tribal leader Bansing Balamban told Manny.

Since their discovery last year, the tribe has had experienced changes. Young girls who were half naked were given clothes, and the men were hired to guard their village with token compensation. A road leading to the tribal community is being built. No worries about ruining their location—while the road stretches for 60 kilometers through winding mountainsides, the tribal location is still about 30 kilometers deep into the jungle.

The army soldiers are now acting as the illiterate children’s first teacher.

Manny Piñol and his team are working to release a video feature on the “Forgotten Tribe.”

Photos courtesy of Manny Piñol’s Facebook page.


Look also: https://aboutphilippines.org/ethnic-indigenous-groups.html