THE striking image of a Filipino girl – a member of the indigenous Badjao tribe – begging in the streets of Lucban, a town in Quezon province south of Manila, has gone viral in the Philippines and prompted a flood of public concern and support for her and her impoverished family.

A photographer spotted the child, later identified as 13-year-old Rita Gaviola from Zamboanga City on the southern island of Mindanao. Tweets and Facebook posts and media coverage celebrated the girl’s beauty and her dream to become a teacher.
Those reports don’t mention that there are thousands of other residents of Zamboanga City, including many Badjao, who were displaced and forced into destitution following the armed confrontation between government forces and rebels from the Moro National Liberation Front in September 2013. That violence killed nearly 200 people, displaced more than 100,000 residents, and destroyed thousands of homes. The city’s ethnic minorities, including the Badjao, were particularly vulnerable to displacement and forced relocation following the fighting.

The authorities, with little or no genuine consultation, forcibly moved the Badjao inland from their homes along the coast, despite their traditional occupation as fishermen. To this day, thousands of Badjao and other residents, mostly Muslims, remain homeless, living in dire conditions in evacuation sites.

The Badjao, like many of the Philippines’ indigenous peoples, are a neglected tribe. Commonly referred to as “sea gypsies” because they live and fish in coastal areas, the Badjao live in extreme poverty – often beyond the reach of state assistance due to their nomadic existence. The result is that many of them join the ranks of beggars in the Philippines’ urban centers or dive for coins thrown by boat passengers.

The public concern for Rita Gaviola is an opportunity for the new Philippine government to strengthen efforts to ensure the rights of livelihood, housing and health to the Badjao and other indigenous peoples who, too often, are denied those rights in the face of discrimination, conflict or displacement. The government should start by providing adequate resettlement based on consultation for the Badjao and the thousands of others who remain in squalid evacuation centers in Zamboanga City.

The government should also help ensure the livelihood of the Badjao by relocating them to areas that allow access to the seashore so that they can work as fishermen. Perhaps then Rita Gaviola – and the thousands of Badjao like her – can finally stop begging and return home. (HRW Dispatches/Carlos H. Conde)

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