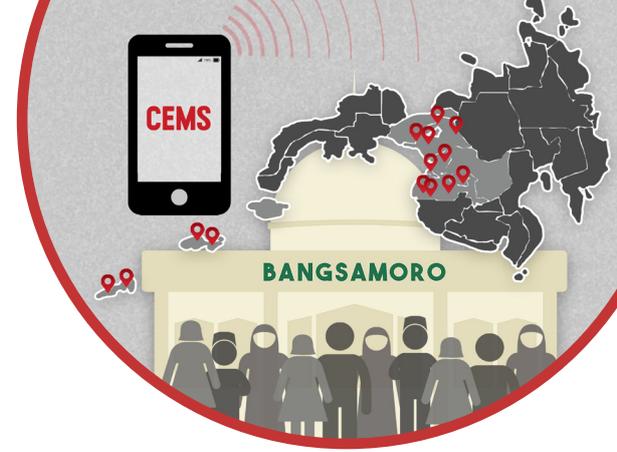


CRITICAL EVENTS MONITORING SYSTEM BULLETIN

Period covered: May 2019

Date of release: 24 July 2019



Political rivalries unleash cycle of retribution

The rains in May provided relief from the heat but, in pockets of the Bangsamoro, the situation remained tense after the 13 May polls as political rivalries ignited longstanding conflicts or sparked new feuds. The belief the vote was rigged in certain localities also portended disputes that would take long to settle.

Meanwhile, as Muslim Filipinos observed the holy month of Ramadhan and Marawi commemorated the second anniversary of the war that broke out in the Islamic city on 23 May 2017, the threat of violent extremism loomed. There were sightings of armed men in towns bordering Butig, Lanao del Sur where the Maute Group, which led the siege on Marawi, traced its beginnings.

This picture for May was pieced together using 120 reports from Early Response Network (ERN) members based in Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao.¹ Around 70% of the reports covered incidents that occurred after the 13 May elections and up to the end of that month. The rest of the reports were about incidents that took place at the beginning of May up to election day, but excluding election-related incidents that were covered by an earlier bulletin.²

Series of vengeful acts

The 2019 election for seats in local government units (LGU) unleashed a series of vengeful acts involving political rivals, their supporters, and their families and clans.

In some places, the polls provided the latest trigger to fighting among political families and clans that are locked in perpetual conflict. Such was the case of two clans that contested a seat in Bayang, Lanao del Sur. An altercation between clan members and their supporters on election day touched off a cycle of retribution that resulted in damaged property, attacks on members of one clan, and this clan's preparations to hit back. Although related, these clans have long been in conflict.

Meanwhile, in Lumbatan, Lanao del Sur, a former barangay chairman and the family of the one who defeated him in the 2018 barangay election engaged in new bouts of fighting. A firefight took place between them and their men on 13 May, killing the current chairman's sister in the process. Another firefight followed on 22 May. The former chairman has held the other family responsible for the death of a sibling. His loss in the 2018 election also rankled.

¹ ERN members gather and act on the CEMS reports. They are autonomous individuals and members of groups with grassroots reach who monitor disputes and harness traditional, formal, and hybrid institutions and arrangements to defuse or resolve violent conflicts. Among them are women and youth leaders. International Alert Philippines established the CEMS to gather real-time reports on tensions and violent conflicts in communities in the Bangsamoro. Reports are transmitted through SMS, stored in a database, and processed for deployment of context-specific responses by key stakeholders on the ground.

² That report can be read here: <http://conflictaalert.info/cems/cems-bulletin-22-may-2019/>

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No violent incidents were monitored in May after the polls in Ganassi in Lanao del Sur and Pagalungan in Maguindanao, but these places would remain as hotspots due to acrimony among candidates during and after the campaign. In Ganassi, separate incidents linked to two rivals for mayor and targeting members of the other's family were followed by firefight between their supporters at the highway on election day. The defeated candidate filed a case against the winner for the alleged harm done to his siblings. In Pagalungan, one of the candidates for mayor blamed another for attacks on family members and supporters before the election.

The contest for local positions also sparked new feuds. In Malabang, one of the mayoral candidates, a member of a clan that was entrenched in local politics, filed a disqualification case at the Commission on Elections against a newcomer, but the latter managed to continue to run and win.³ Only the military's presence in Malabang prevented bloodshed after the election.

In other localities, election outcomes would remain contestable amid reports of fraud and voting machine breakdowns on election day.

As winners take their seats in LGUs this month, the ways they navigate their terrain amid challenges from political opponents will be crucial. They will need the support of their electorate in bringing about promised progress – and in parrying the constant threat of violent extremism.

Armed men sightings

Throughout the month of May, armed men were sighted in Lumbatan, Lumbaca-Unayan, and Marogong in Lanao del Sur, towns contiguous to Butig. Their affiliation was uncertain but locals, who did not recognize

any of them, suspected them of being members of the Maute Group, which was believed to be regrouping. Their movement had been unhampered, and they easily passed through barangays in Lumbatan in the north, to Lumbaca-Unayan in the middle, and to Marogong in the south, where thick forests provided cover for their comings and goings.

Time would confirm their affiliations. Until then, close monitoring of their activities would serve well to prevent a rampage similar to the Maute Group's, which culminated in the takeover of Marawi. These should be matched with programs preventing the recruitment of the youth to violent extremism.

What of Marawi?

Memories of the war in 2017 continued to haunt Marawi residents, particularly in May, when a marker commemorating the unidentified hundreds who perished was installed at the public cemetery where their remains were buried.

War survivors who were displaced and housed in temporary shelters continued to complain of the lack of public services such as water. They hailed the rains in May as a blessing as they were able to fill their water containers.

Meanwhile, a profiling of displaced families was temporarily halted on 22 May by the Task Force Bangon Marawi (TFBM), charged with Marawi's reconstruction and rehabilitation, after a sudden surge of people who sought to join it. This profiling was important because verified city residents would get financial assistance: P73,000 per family that used to reside in the most affected area or MAA and P20,000 per family that lived outside the MAA. The possibility of being excluded from the assistance program had created disquiet among displaced families.

³ Ercel Maandig and Jigger Jerusalem, *Philippine News Agency, Incumbents win in CDO, MisOr; but not in Lanao Sur town*, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1070131> (accessed on 27 June 2019).

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Poor conditions at the relocation centers, the slow pace of clearing and reconstruction work at the MAA, the inability of families to return to their homes or to claim what used to be their homes, and the President's apparent lack of commitment to rebuild homes destroyed during the war or to provide reparations have led to frustration among the war survivors.⁴ This is a slippery slope the government would want to avoid, as the problem of violent extremism remains unquashed. It could fuel recruitment to extremist groups, particularly among the vulnerable.

Battle against criminality

Elsewhere in the Bangsamoro, Cotabato City got its first female police chief. The former

police chief did not find favor with the local government, which found him ineffective against a spate of criminality, including the shooting of a Human Rights Commission (HRC) investigator.⁵

Meanwhile, expensive vehicles used in a rent-a-car scam that was operated from Cotabato City were recovered in Sulu, 372 kilometers away, and returned to owners. The vehicles had been lent to operators, on the understanding these would be used in a rental business. However, the vehicles were actually pawned or sold to other parties.⁶

⁴ Argyll Cyrus Geducos, *Manila Bulletin*, *Duterte on Marawi private properties: I don't think I should spend for them*, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2019/04/26/duterte-on-marawi-private-properties-i-dont-think-i-should-spend-for-them/> (accessed 29 June 2019).

⁵ Ferdinand B. Cabrera, *MindaNews*, *Cop, trader killed in Friday night shootings in Cotabato City*, <https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2019/05/cop-trader-killed-in-friday-night-shootings-in-cotabato-city/> (accessed 30 June 2019).

⁶ Ali Macabalang, *Manila Bulletin*, *NBI charges 4 civilians, Army officer in Cotabato 'rent-a-car' scam*, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2019/04/27/nbi-charges-4-civilians-army-officer-in-cotabato-rent-a-car-scam/> (accessed 30 June 2019).

International Alert's Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) is an SMS-based reporting system that captures conflict incidents and tensions in communities that may or may not lead to the eruption of violence. It is used by its Early Response Network (ERN), a group of men and women in various localities in the Bangsamoro, who share real-time information and work with local governments, key agencies, the security sector, and religious and traditional leaders in coordinating quick and context-specific responses to tensions, violent conflicts, disasters, and displacement, as they happen. Command posts are led by our local partners TASBIKKA, Inc., ERN Lanao del Sur, MARADECA, Inc., and Lupah Sug Bangsamoro Women Association, Inc.



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