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CONFLICT  
ALERT  
2021-2023

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PEACE

## About Conflict Alert

Conflict Alert is a subnational conflict monitoring system that tracks the incidence, causes, and human costs of violent conflict in the Philippines. It aims to shape policy making, development strategies, and peacebuilding approaches by providing relevant, robust, and reliable data.

Conflict Alert was developed by International Alert Philippines and is now managed by the Council for Climate and Conflict Action Asia, a local peacebuilding organisation.

[www.conflictalert.info](http://www.conflictalert.info)

## About Council for Climate and Conflict Action Asia (Climate Conflict Action)

Climate Conflict Action is an independent non-governmental organization working at the nexus between climate and conflict. We gather and analyse conflict and climate data to collaborate with communities towards actions that lead to sustainable peace. Our data, a vital tool in our efforts, is not just a collection of numbers and statistics; it is the result of painstaking monitoring of actual realities on the ground.

With years of experience in conflict monitoring, data analysis, research, and advocacy, we uncover the underlying factors driving conflict and vulnerabilities and provide accurate, actionable insights that inform interventions and strategies. We believe in the power of truth as a foundation for constructive dialogue and meaningful change.

Conflict Alert is supported by the Australian Government and implemented by the Council for Climate and Conflict Action Asia.



### Disclaimer:

This publication has been funded by the Australian Government. The opinions expressed in this report are solely of the Council for Climate and Conflict Action Asia and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.

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# Acknowledgements

**The Conflict Alert Triennial Report** (2021-2023) continues the tedious task of conflict monitoring and analysis in a region transitioning to peace. This inaugural publication by the Climate Conflict Action (CCAA), takes off from where International Alert Philippines left off, with new themes emerging from the dramatic shifts in violence in the past three years and perspectives about the forthcoming and decisive political battles in 2025.

The publication underscores our dedication to evidence-based analysis and impact, and our determination to speak truth to power. It would not have been possible without the inspiration, trust, and unwavering support of our partners.

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Australia's support has enabled the Conflict Alert monitoring system to provide a valuable conflict data resource for policy makers, planners, and peacebuilders, including the various diplomatic posts, global media offices, and international

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Our reports have always been accompanied by videos that highlight key findings and provide a scoping of emerging violence trends within a specific timeframe, illustrating the narrative of conflict patterns. We thus also extend our thanks to **Phoebe Dominique Adorable** for drafting the script of our highlights video, which effectively captures the report’s main points, and to **Kinno Toogue** for producing the scoping video narrating the story that encapsulates the current conflict situation in the Bangsamoro.

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As in previous reports, we dedicate this work to the countless community leaders, peacebuilders and local government officials in the areas where we are. We know the difficulties of confronting conflict and violence, particularly between families, neighbors, and clans, and in making sure that communities can live peacefully. The journey to lasting peace and development is fraught with challenges, yet hope remains resilient, much like the people of the Bangsamoro who tirelessly strive for it.

**Francisco J. “Pancho” Lara, Jr., Ph.D.,**  
*Executive Director*

**Maureen Anthea T. Lacuesta,**  
*Senior Programme Manager – Conflict Monitoring*

*Manila, Philippines, 22 August 2024*

# Foreword

**Strengthening peace and stability in Muslim Mindanao** is a longstanding priority of the Government of Australia through our development assistance to the Philippines. Our support for the Conflict Alert report series over the past decade is among our important contributions to enhancing the conditions for stability across the Bangsamoro. The systems established by the Council for Climate and Conflict Asia (CCAA) – formerly International Alert Philippines – provide a reliable source of data about the nature of violence in the Bangsamoro.

The Appeasing Violence, Conjuring Peace: Conflict Alert 2021-2023 Report is timely as the resilience of the formal peace process is being tested 10 years on from the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). The Report outlines the challenges that remain to achieving the vision of the 2014 CAB, including on issues such as land rights, violent extremism, high levels of violence within communities and the subsequent impact on vulnerable groups including non-Moro Indigenous Peoples, women and children.

The Report also proposes steps that would make a meaningful difference for the Bangsamoro, including bolstering conflict monitoring and dispute resolution mechanisms, enhancing the role of the media and access to information, and ways to protect the ongoing peace process. I would encourage leaders and key actors to take note of these as the region heads to its first BARMM Parliamentary elections in May 2025.

Since becoming Ambassador to the Philippines in 2022, I have visited different parts of the BARMM including Cotabato City, Camp Badre in Maguindanao del Sur, and Marawi City and heard about these challenges firsthand. These visits have impressed upon me the importance of improving human security, and economic and social development for communities that are yet to fully experience the dividends of peace. Delivering on this promise requires a joint effort by all peacebuilding stakeholders from communities, all levels of government – barangays, municipal, regional and national – and international partners, to make the Bangsamoro a safer place to live.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate CCAA for its dedication and tireless work to understanding and addressing conflict dynamics in the Bangsamoro. This latest triennial report is a valuable resource for all who are committed in achieving a lasting and inclusive peace in the BARMM.

**HK Yu PSM, FCPA (Aust)**

*Australian Ambassador to the Philippines*

**Conflict Alert** has produced a frank, gutsy analysis of conflict in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) that tells this truth to power: the “peace” brought into being by the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) is no peace.

In the brutally honest way that we have come to expect from this independent think-tank backed by meticulous data and refusal to sugarcoat facts, Conflict Alert tells us that violence is thriving in BARMM as the 2025 elections approach. Contrary to the praise heaped on the BARMM government by President Marcos during his State of the Nation Address and his reference to “the improved peace and order situation,” killings linked to identity conflict are on the rise. The epicenter is Maguindanao, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) heartland, and a major perpetrator is the MILF itself.

What happened to the hope and promises of the peace process? Where are the police, when virtually every day in Cotabato or Maguindanao del Sur or del Norte, “unidentified” gunmen driving by on motorcycles undertake a targeted killing of someone’s rival, presumably for a monetary reward? And where is civil society, which in some cases has aligned with political patrons?

Conflict Alert’s reports are always worth studying. They wake you up, as this one does. They tell you not to believe everything you hear. They tell donors not to indulge in wishful thinking, and they remind journalists to look at the facts. The last few months have seen pledge after pledge by BARMM political parties of their commitment to peace. They all should read this report. Then they should get their top strategists together and come up with a roadmap for addressing the violence it documents. Not by talking about it, not by bland rhetoric and empty gestures, but by stopping it.

**Sidney Jones**

*Senior Advisor, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, Jakarta*

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# Abbreviations

<b>AFP</b>	Armed Forces of the Philippines
<b>ARMM</b>	Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
<b>ASG</b>	Abu Sayyaf Group
<b>BARMM</b>	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
<b>BCMS</b>	Bangsamoro Conflict Monitoring System
<b>BIAF</b>	Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces
<b>BIFF</b>	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters
<b>BOL</b>	Bangsamoro Organic Law
<b>BSK</b>	Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan
<b>BTA</b>	Bangsamoro Transition Authority
<b>BWC</b>	Bangsamoro Women Commission
<b>CAB</b>	Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro
<b>CCAA</b>	Climate Conflict Action
<b>CEMS</b>	Critical Events Monitoring System
<b>CNN</b>	Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus disease
<b>DBM</b>	Department of Budget and Management
<b>DI</b>	Dawlah Islamiya
<b>ERN</b>	Early Response Network
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>ICG</b>	International Crisis Group
<b>IED</b>	Improvised explosive device

<b>IP</b>	Indigenous peoples
<b>IPAC</b>	Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict
<b>IPRA</b>	Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act
<b>IPS</b>	Indigenous Political Structure
<b>IRA</b>	Internal revenue allotment
<b>LGU</b>	Local government unit
<b>MCB</b>	Marawi Compensation Board
<b>MILF</b>	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
<b>MNLF</b>	Moro National Liberation Front
<b>MSVG</b>	Multi-Stakeholder Validation Group
<b>NMIP</b>	Non-Moro indigenous peoples
<b>NPA</b>	New People's Army
<b>OPAPRU</b>	Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity
<b>PAG</b>	Private Armed Group
<b>PCA</b>	Principal Component Analysis
<b>PNP</b>	Philippine National Police
<b>RA</b>	Republic Act
<b>SGA</b>	Special Geographic Area
<b>SGLG</b>	Seal of Good Local Governance
<b>SONA</b>	State of the Nation Address
<b>UBJP</b>	United Bangsamoro Justice Party
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>VAWC</b>	Violence against women and children
<b>VE</b>	Violent extremism
<b>VII</b>	Violence intensity index





Residents of Brgy. Darampua, Sultan sa Barongis, Maguindanao del Sur, travel by boat through the Ligawasan Marsh, an area frequently plagued by conflict and displacement due to clan feuding and land disputes, further intensified by the presence of armed groups like the BIFF and violent extremists. The community not only endures the hardships of violent conflict but also faces the growing threat of climate change. August 2024. © Najib Zacaria



# Executive summary

**Conflict Alert** stood as an independent and autonomous witness to the ebb and flow of violent conflict in the last decade, from 2011 to 2020, when terrorism and violent extremism (VE) surpassed insurgency and rebellion as the leading cause of vertical violence in the Bangsamoro. It has observed how clan feuding over land and natural resources was overwhelmed by clan feuding over political authority and state resources. It has seen how ethnic struggles pitting minorities against other minorities have catalysed brutal attacks against non-Moro indigenous groups. Finally, it noted how lucrative shadow economies such as illegal drugs have become the new currency for enlarging politico-economic power and sustaining weak and fragile states.

## Conflict rebound

Violent conflict is on a rebound two years after the passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) and ten years after the conflict-to-peace transition began when the Bangsamoro peace agreement was signed in 2014. The long view of violence clearly shows an upturn in the trendline starting in 2021.

It is apparent that the path to a lasting peace has been obstructed again, bringing renewed suffering, uncertainty, and insecurity especially among women and children, years after the conclusion of peace negotiations and the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). These cracks are expected to widen further as the first regional elections descend upon the region in 2025.

## Location and dynamics

There must be deeper reasons behind the elusiveness of a sustainable peace in the Bangsamoro, and why the decline in violence after the Marawi siege, the declaration of martial law, and the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, has been reversed before violence could recede to their pre-Marawi war levels. The answer can be found in a deeper examination of the places where violence is rising and the evolving causes of violence.

The data reveals that violence is rising fastest in the province where the new BARMM government sits and exercises regional authority. The old and undivided Maguindanao province, including Cotabato City, followed the ten-year conflict trend by registering the biggest number of violent incidents in the past three years, from 2021 to 2023. Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur recorded significant increases since 2021, which was repeated in 2023 together with Sulu.

The dominance of Maguindanao's numbers is partly explained by the overwhelming population of the province in contrast to the other BARMM provinces. However, even when data is filtered and examined based on violence and deaths per capita and per square kilometer, the place of Maguindanao at the top remains unchanged.

Ostensibly, the risk of getting involved in violence, being displaced, or worse, being killed in Maguindanao is almost twice as likely to occur than in any other province such as Basilan or Lanao del Sur. The division of Maguindanao into two separate provinces—Norte and Sur—in 2022 does not diminish the role of the Maguindanao provinces as a barometer for peace, or the lack of it, in the BARMM.

But there is more to Maguindanao than its large population.

**One**, Maguindanao's dominance is also shaped by the presence of the new BARMM regional government in Maguindanao province since 2019 when the BOL was passed. The province ultimately faced most of the vertical assaults from both extremist and insurgent challengers after the siege of Marawi in 2017.

**Two**, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) acquired countervailing power and authority in the province when it assumed the reins of the new BARMM political authority in 2019. However, with no genuine decommissioning nor demobilization of its forces, collective acts of violence continued. The signing of the peace agreement and the establishment of the regional government did not end violence, it thrived under it.

The MILF itself became a major source of violence and insecurity. Collective attacks waged by MILF commanders against state law enforcers are still reported regularly. The regional government and its law enforcement and peacebuilding instruments have failed to curtail the violence, including those directed against law enforcers themselves.

**Three**, much of the collective violence in the BARMM occurred in Maguindanao because the preponderance of vertical and horizontal attacks came from internal schisms and feuding within the MILF organization itself. The inability to contain the violence from within its own ranks expose the serious internal grievances within the MILF and the weak governance of the normalization process by both the government and the MILF.

**Finally**, most of the recent identity-related violence is also attributed to armed attacks waged by various rebel and private armed groups against indigenous peoples (IP), in particular the non-Moro tribes such as the Teduray-Lambangian and Dulangan-Manobo who are principally located in Maguindanao and adjacent provinces.

Land and other resource conflicts have fanned the violence against IPs. Recent attempts to institutionalize ancestral land claims have triggered a rush among outsiders to aggressively seize tribal lands and neutralize tribal leaders who resist land grabbing.

## Main and specific causes and costs of conflict

Shadow economy-related conflict sustained its characteristic as the major site of violent conflict, followed by identity-related conflict. Illicit drugs and guns figured prominently among the shadow economy enterprises. Meanwhile, identity-related violence came second and included clan feuding over land and political office, persistent extremist violence, and violent political contestation.

However, though shadow economy-related violence remained high, identity-related conflict was deadlier. The number of deaths from identity-related violence rose significantly to eclipse shadow economy and political violence at the end of 2023. By 2023, identity-related conflict became the major cause of death.

### Identity and land conflicts

As aforementioned, a key aspect of identity-related conflict concerns land and political violence against IPs. Violent polarization between Muslims and Christians is the vicious side effect of the confluence between identity, resource, and political violence. This is manifested by the number of assassinations, random physical attacks, and indiscriminate bombings using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), particularly in the Special Geographic Areas (SGA) that were recently incorporated into the BARMM.

Land conflicts have also been deadlier from 2021 to 2023 as clashes escalated between various land claimants. Tensions arose from indigenous land claims and settler protests—highlighted by the exclusion of the distinct land rights of the non-Moro indigenous peoples (NMIPs) and the illegal landgrab of ancestral lands through the use of existing land tenure instruments to legitimize the forceful transfer of land to illegitimate claimants. Added tensions and violence are also reported from the application and implementation of camps transformation and investment projects—including areas supported by foreign development assistance.

## Political battles and rising profits stir shadow economy-related violence

Shadow economies in guns and drugs continue to maintain a significant presence in the BARMM, despite decommissioning and normalization, and the so-called war on drugs by the Duterte government.

The onset of major political-electoral battles in the past three years fueled the upsurge in illicit guns and weapons. New weapons flooded the black market as various armed groups resupplied their armories in preparation for plebiscites and elections. The illicit guns market claimed the most conflict deaths in the Bangsamoro region despite having fewer incidents compared to illegal drugs.

Meanwhile, a doubling in illicit drug-related incidents in the past three years came from a more robust and vibrant illicit drugs market. The illegal drugs sector was never as deadly in the BARMM in comparison to the rest of the country even during the Duterte government, which made it easier to expand after the previous government. Investments and profits in the illicit manufacture and trade of various drugs and narcotics has turned drug money and profits into the chief currency for securing robust economic resources and vast political power.

## Mainland concentration of violent extremists

Identity-related conflict violence in the form of extremist violence has seen significant declines—with previous hotspots such as Sulu and Basilan encountering less incidents and costs. However, the decline has been accompanied by critical changes in the concentration and magnitude of extremist violence.

**First**, incidents of VE are now primarily concentrated in the mainland provinces of Lanao del Sur and both Maguindanao del Sur and del Norte, rather than the island provinces of Sulu and Basilan.

**Second**, conflict deaths have exceeded the number of incidents. For years, the number of conflict incidents have always surpassed the

number of deaths, except in 2017 during the war in Marawi, indicating that cases of extremist violence included clashes where both parties did not always lead to deaths. In contrast, most incidents today, whether in the form of arrests, clashes, or ambushes, produce fatalities. Few violent extremists are being arrested.

**Finally**, there are numerous reports of extremist violence being preceded by reports of VE recruitment in several hotspots in Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte. Recruitment is also accompanied by the growing concern over the expected hiring out by VE groups of their services to political actors to consolidate resources and networks, as they did prior to every election from 2015 and 2016 in Lanao del Sur.

## Temporal nature of conflict

The Conflict Alert 2021 to 2023 report identifies critical periods when violent conflict often erupts and intensifies, demonstrating the changing terrain of temporal violence that is increasingly tied to recent and forthcoming political battles and democratic contestation. Recent events cannot be disentangled from the traditional violence during the agricultural lean months from July to September—because village elections overlapped.

The number of incidents in 2022 was highest in May during the national elections and in October in 2023 during the barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan (BSK) elections with 242 and 273 incidents, respectively.

The Ramadan period, which often fell within the periods of mid-March to mid-May fluctuated in the three-year period. The highest was in 2022 as it coincided in the run-up to the national elections on 9 May 2022. In 2023, numbers were high with 215 incidents in March before declining to 197 in April.

## Conclusion

### Peace cannot be conjured

It is difficult to make claims about development and peace by conjuring a magical peace that collides with the dull and usual realities of war. The recent pronouncement of the President in the 2024 State of the Nation Address (SONA) emphasized *“the improved peace and order situation, good governance — not to mention high hopes and confidence amongst its people”* in the region.

The evidence does not confirm nor prove the idea of a peace momentum that the regional government and national government have repeatedly declared through numerous pronouncements about improved peace and order and good governance. The data instead indicates new sources of instability and a conflict rebound that may go higher with the upcoming elections and its aftermath.

### Real public perceptions about moral governance

The fact that most of the violence is happening at the seat of the regional government speaks volumes about the fragility and weakness of the state and the fractionalization in state building and governance.

There is no weaker state than that which cannot ensure peace nor discipline and control forces directly within its reach. Political infighting and divisions within the ranks of the ruling authority, the unmet normalization and decommissioning targets, and long delays in crucial legislation on land and other resource issues do not conjure responsiveness and flexibility, but intransigence and inefficiency.

### Fragile hopes and shaky confidence

The “high hopes and confidence” over a so-called democratic transition is marred by violent attacks using illegal guns and automatic weapons, the displacement of indigenous

peoples, women, and children, and the continuing scourge of terrorism and extremism.

However, some encouraging stories did emerge, in which honesty and truth prevailed. In 2023, Climate Conflict Action (CCA) reported that the barangay elections were the bloodiest recorded in the history of the region, a statement rebuffed and assailed by vested interests who sought to conceal the extent of violence in the conflict-to-peace transition. However, it was eventually vindicated when the Philippine National Police (PNP), less than a week later, declared that it had indeed been the deadliest electoral battle according to their own figures. In early 2024, the Bangsamoro Women Commission (BWC) also cited Conflict Alert data to underscore the resilient gender inequalities in the region.

### Where the writ is weak, peace is robust

Peace appears to be more robust farther from the center of the regional state. Across the Bangsamoro from 2021 to 2023, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi had far lower numbers in terms of both incidents and deaths, even when weighed per capita and per square kilometer. Apart from the size of the population, these two islands sustained the conflict paradox of achieving peace despite their distance from the regional and central state.

Distance did not mean a lack of acquiescence to central authority nor autonomy from a countervailing authority. Distance from the central and regional state instead provoked local “men of prowess” or the much-maligned traditional political leaders to trust and depend mainly on themselves. Political elites carved out an environment where local political settlements were reached and enforced, clans were mediated, regulations were few, enterprises were seldom taxed, and deterrence was achieved with everyone possessing weapons.

## Risks and steps forward

### Risks

**One**, the conflict picture portends an increased level of violence across the region as the 2025 political battle looms closer. All provinces will witness violence, but the mainland Bangsamoro center, or Maguindanao for that matter, will experience the worst.

**Two**, the conflict terrain in the lead up to the 2025 elections will see deaths and displacements multiply among vulnerable sectors such as the NMIPs, especially among their women and children.

**Three**, the internal armed struggles involving the MILF, Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Dawlah Islamiya (DI), and the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front (CNN) will intensify. Coordinated and cooperative armed attacks against state forces will likely increase, including efforts to shame the national government and the regional authority.

**Four**, the links between illicit drugs, weapons, and electoral campaigns are getting stronger, and drug money is beginning to fuel the campaigns of politicians and fund the security requirements of clans and other armed groups.

### Steps forward: all hands-on-deck for the 2025 elections

**One**, redundant and autonomous monitoring systems at various levels need to be supported to do their work. Their integrity, autonomy, and independence in conflict monitoring and survey research must be protected and enhanced.

**Two**, the 2025 elections require strong and collaborative responses from the media. Tri-media outlets and watchdogs, including social media, in cooperation with research and academic groups can begin to cooperate to prevent the spread of fake news and panic that can be manipulated to prevent a peaceful election, or worse, lead to a failure of elections.

**Three**, mediating violent and longstanding feuds and deterring revenge need to be done as early as possible, before polarization occurs and hostilities erupt during the elections.

**Four**, humanitarian and legal aid groups need to prepare early for rescue and support, and early response.

**Finally**, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU) stands out as the key government agency responsible for sustaining the peace process, notwithstanding the hostility of Congress—particularly on the decommissioning process. Yet, appeasing violence instead of curing it is only a short-term solution to a longstanding problem.

As OPAPRU has acted against all odds to protect a fragile peace, it can still ringfence Maguindanao's ground zero from violence during the 2025 elections. Making South Upi, Upi, and Datu Odin Sinsuat impervious to election-related violence is a first step. A development response to the needs of marginalized and displaced non-Moro indigenous peoples is the next step, alongside the massive investments in camp transformation for the MILF.





Rickshaws and motorbikes plying the busy Jolo Public Market on Serantes street, with the Masjid Tulay –the biggest and oldest mosque in Jolo, Sulu– standing in the background on October 8, 2022. © **Martin San Diego**



# Appeasing Violence, Conjuring Peace

**The Conflict Alert  
2021-2023 Report**



# Introduction

**International Alert Philippines, now the Climate Conflict Action (CCAA)**, established the Bangsamoro Conflict Monitoring System (BCMS) in 2013 to monitor and record incidents of subnational violence in Muslim Mindanao. The database aimed to strengthen the quantitative evidence needed to achieve a political settlement to the Mindanao conflict and usher in conflict-sensitive development and peacebuilding.

Vertical violence was an important characteristic of violent conflict in Muslim Mindanao at the turn of the century, with various rebel groups waging attacks against the State at multiple levels.<sup>1</sup> Horizontal violence took the form of inter- and intra-clan feuding and revenge killings. However, the nature and characteristics of conflict changed dramatically since the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) was signed in 2014 and the BOL was ratified in 2019.

Conflict Alert stood as an independent and autonomous witness to the ebb and flow of violent conflict in the last decade, from 2011 to 2020, when terrorism and extremist violence surpassed insurgency and rebellion as the leading cause of vertical violence in the Bangsamoro. It has observed how clan feuding over land and natural resources was

overwhelmed by clan feuding over political office and state resources. It has seen how ethnic struggles pitting minorities against other minorities have catalysed brutal attacks against non-Moro indigenous groups. Finally, it noted how lucrative shadow economies such as illegal drugs have become the new currency for enlarging politico-economic power and sustaining weak and fragile states.

A comprehensive assessment of the conflict situation entitled “Conflict’s Long Game: A Decade of Violence in the Bangsamoro” was published by Alert Philippines in 2022 analysing conflict data from 2011 to 2020. The conflict database was brought up to date by CCAA in 2023.

This report captures the conflict situation from 2021 to 2023.



Children find moments of joy in Ligawasan Marsh, Maguindanao del Sur, one of the Philippines’ largest wetlands. A lifeline for local communities, the marsh is also a site of armed conflict in the Bangsamoro region. August 2024. [📍 Najib Zacaria](#)

<sup>1</sup> The year 2000 war unleashed by the government is emblematic of this period.



Armoured personnel carriers from the Philippine Army arrive to assist in the defense against members of the BIFF Karialan faction who engaged in a gunbattle with the military in Poblacion Datu Paglas, Maguindanao (now Maguindanao del Sur), May 2021.

▣ Amiel Cagayan

# Conflict Rebound

**Violent conflict is on a rebound** two years after the passage of the BOL and ten years after the conflict-to-peace transition began when the Bangsamoro peace agreement was signed in 2014. The long view of violence clearly shows an upturn in the number of incidents from 2020 to 2021, slipping slightly in 2022, and rising again in 2023 (**Figure 1**).

The costs of conflict are also rising. Despite the lower number of deaths in 2021, the numbers began to swell from 2022 to 2023 (**Figure 2**). The number of injured and displaced also increased in 2023 (**Figure 3**).

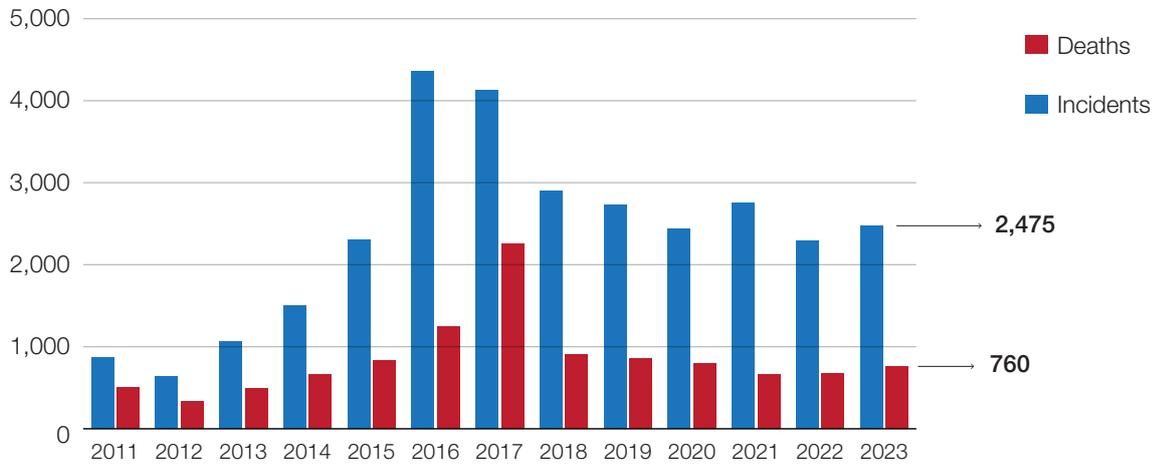
It is apparent that the path to a lasting peace has been obstructed again—years after the conclusion of peace negotiations and the creation of the BARMM.

There must be deeper reasons behind the elusiveness of a sustainable peace in the Bangsamoro, and why the decline in violence, after the Marawi siege, the declaration of martial law, and the COVID-19 pandemic, has been reversed before violence could recede to their pre-Marawi war levels.

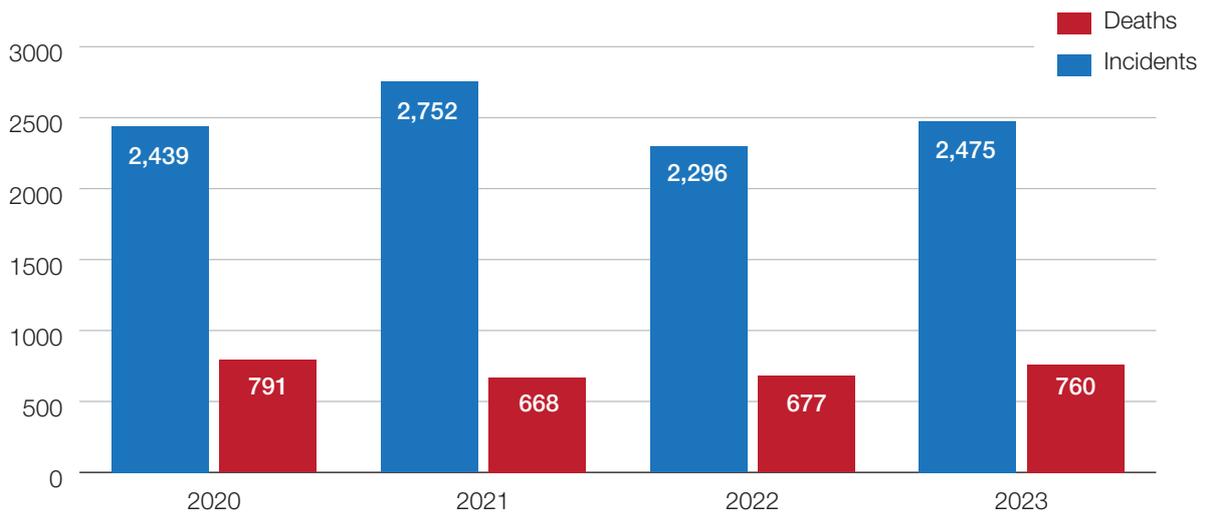
Conflict Alert warned in 2019 that embedded fissures of fragility will continue to disrupt the transition to peace. The report spoke about embedded wars on self and identity, which exposed cleavages and divisions that undermined political authority and fostered exclusion and extremism. Women and children who suffered most from war would continue to face new vulnerabilities and insecurities.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A United States Institute for Peace (USIP) publication in 2022 showed that women and girls “suffer from deeply entrenched discrimination across the BARMM that significantly disadvantages socioeconomic development and fuels further social exclusion in a multigenerational cycle.” (Moner 2022). Two other reports from UNICEF indicate the deep insecurities that persist despite normalization. In 2019, the UNICEF regional director for East Asia spoke of children still left behind. “Almost 30 years after the Philippines ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, far too many children are still left behind particularly in BARMM,” said Karin Hulshof, UNICEF Regional Director for East Asia and Pacific. (UNICEF 2019). In the second report, from a review commissioned by the UNICEF on child protection, justice for children, and social services found “weak policies on child protection in BARMM; no action plan to respond to and prevent violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation; and no strategy to strengthen the child protection system. While there are relevant ministries tackling children’s concerns and a youth commission pushing the children and youth agenda, there is a need for a stronger voice independent from government.” (Saycon 2023)

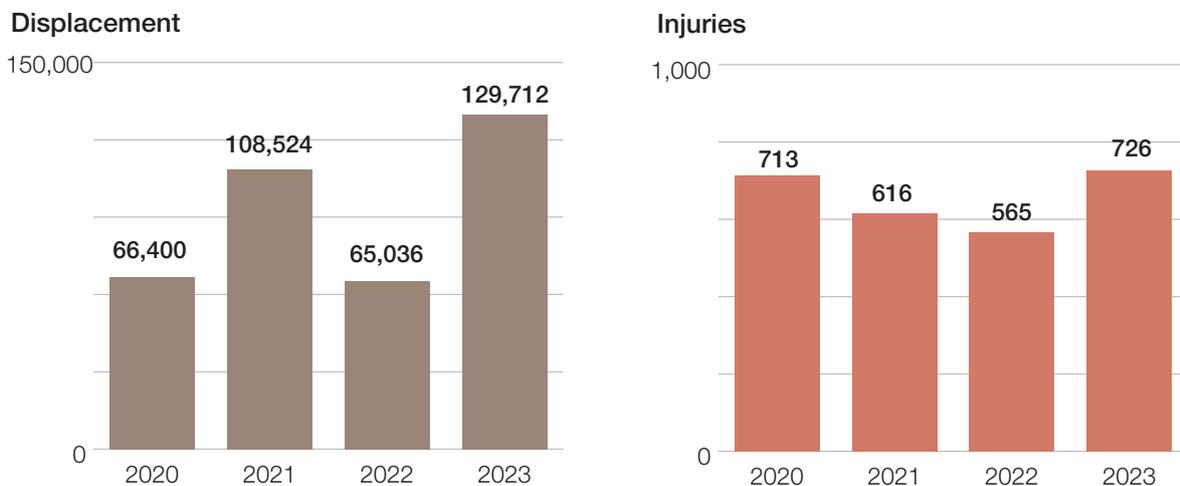
**Figure 1: Conflict incidents and deaths in BARMM, 2011-2023**



**Figure 2: Conflict incidents and deaths, 2020-2023**



**Figure 3: Displacement and injuries in the Bangsamoro, 2020-2023**



Source: UNHCR

These cracks are expected to widen further as the first regional elections will take place in 2025. The signs are evident when one examines the places where violence is rising and the evolving causes of violence.

## Violence in the BARMM mainland dwarfed other local conflicts

The data reveals that violence is rising fastest in the province where the new BARMM government sits and exercises regional authority. The old and undivided Maguindanao province, including Cotabato City, followed the ten-year conflict trend by registering the biggest number of violent incidents in the past three years (2021-2023).<sup>3</sup> Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur recorded significant increases since 2021, which was repeated in 2023 together with Sulu (**Figure 4**).

The scale of violent incidents and deaths from Maguindanao surpassed the other provinces from 2011. Due to the Marawi siege, Lanao del Sur registered the most conflict deaths in 2017, but this outlier was later overturned by the subsequently high numbers of Maguindanao's conflict death (**Figure 5**).

The dominance of Maguindanao's numbers may be partly explained by the overwhelming population of the province in contrast to the other BARMM provinces. To enable a fairer comparison and a more balanced view of conflict's dynamics in the region, data is filtered by weighing violence per 100,000 persons and per square kilometer.

Conflict incidents per 100,000 persons in 2020 was higher in Basilan than in Maguindanao which came second and Tawi-Tawi in third. However, over the past three years from 2021 to 2023, Maguindanao would regain its pole position among all provinces (**Figure 6**).

In terms of conflict deaths per 100,000 persons from 2020 to 2023, Maguindanao province came second to Basilan only in 2022, before returning to the top again in 2023 (**Figure 7**).

Maguindanao also had the highest number of incidents per 1,000 square kilometers among all provinces from 2021 to 2023. (**Figure 8**). In conflict deaths per 1,000 square kilometers, Basilan overtook Maguindanao only once in 2022 (**Figure 9**).

The figures show that an accounting of conflict density and conflict per capita did not alter the place of Maguindanao at the top. The risk of getting involved in violence, being displaced, or worse, being killed in Maguindanao is almost twice as likely to occur than in any other province such as Basilan or Lanao del Sur. The division of Maguindanao into two separate provinces—Norte and Sur—in 2022 does not diminish the role of the Maguindanao provinces as a barometer for peace, or the lack of it, in the BARMM.<sup>4</sup>

## Governance and fragility

But there is more to Maguindanao than its large population.

**One**, Maguindanao's dominance is also shaped by the presence of the new BARMM regional government in Maguindanao province since 2019 when the BOL was passed.<sup>5</sup> As the writ of the MILF-led Bangsamoro parliament and the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) begins in Cotabato City and extends to Maguindanao and the rest of Muslim Mindanao, the province ultimately faced most of the vertical assaults from both extremist and insurgent challengers after the siege of Marawi in 2017 (**Table 1**).

**Table 1: Political violence involving MILF, MNLF, BIFF, and NPA-affiliated actors, 2020-2023**

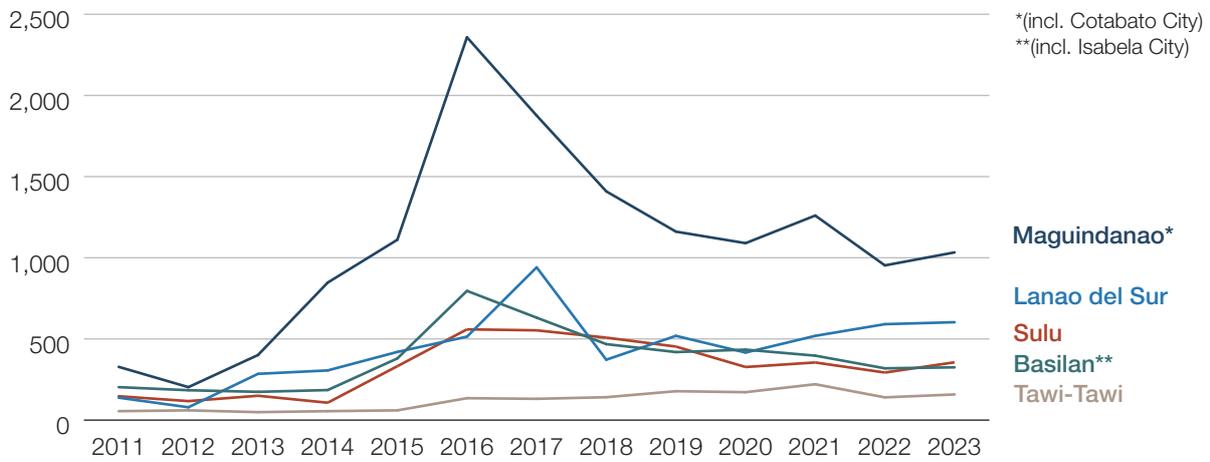
	Incidents	Deaths
2020	111	91
2021	96	68
2022	38	26
2023	32	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>237</b>

<sup>3</sup> Mostly caused by deadly conflicts related to illicit guns and drugs, identity and political conflicts.

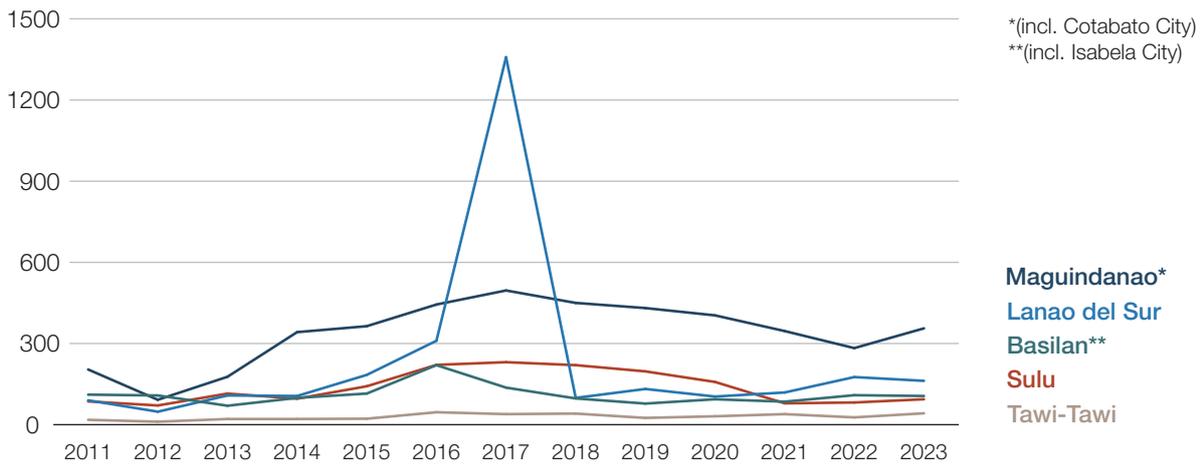
<sup>4</sup> See Box: Divide and Rule: The split of Maguindanao province

<sup>5</sup> Most of the previous governors of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) also governed from Maguindanao province.

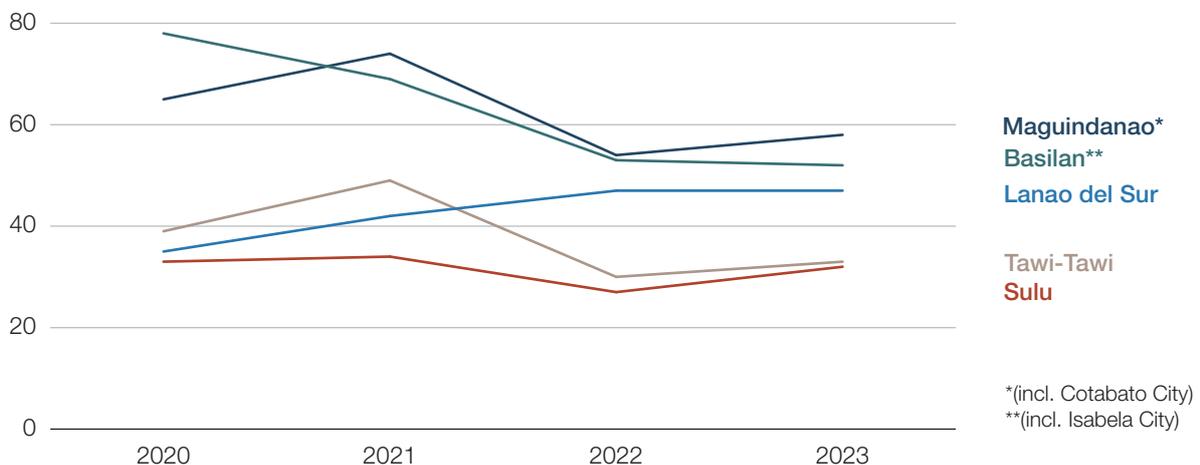
**Figure 4: Conflict incidence by province, 2011-2023**



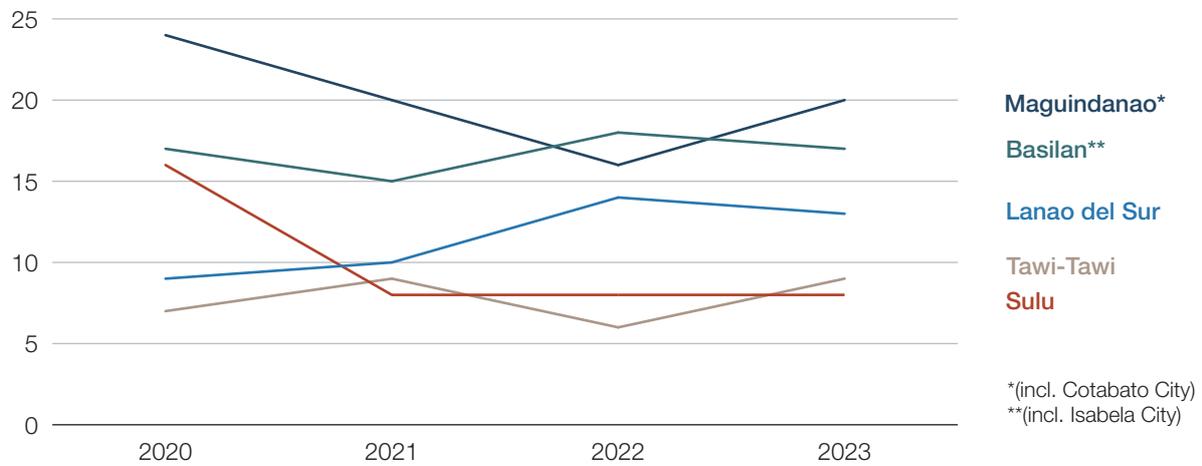
**Figure 5: Conflict deaths by province, 2011-2023**



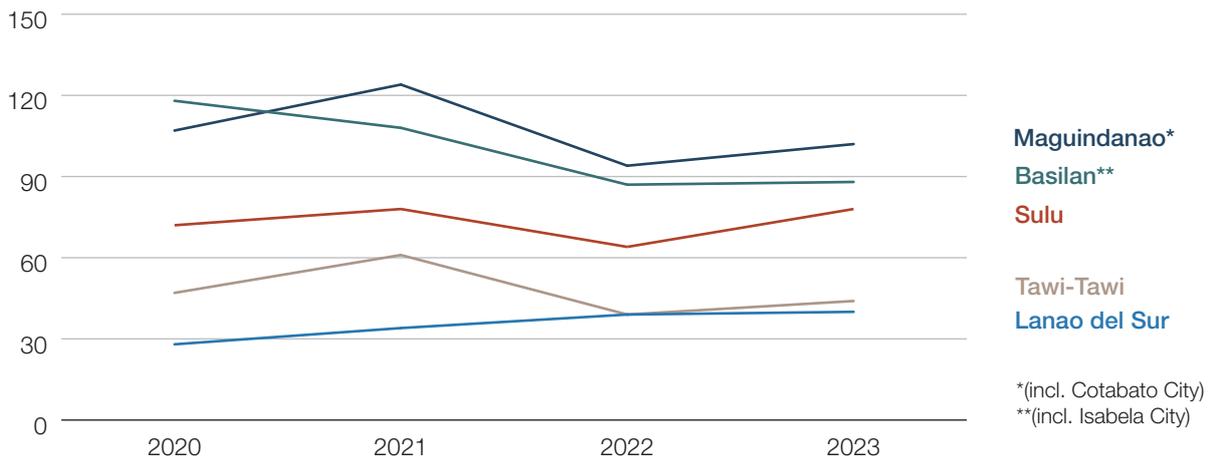
**Figure 6: Conflict incidence per 100,000 persons, by province, 2020-2023**



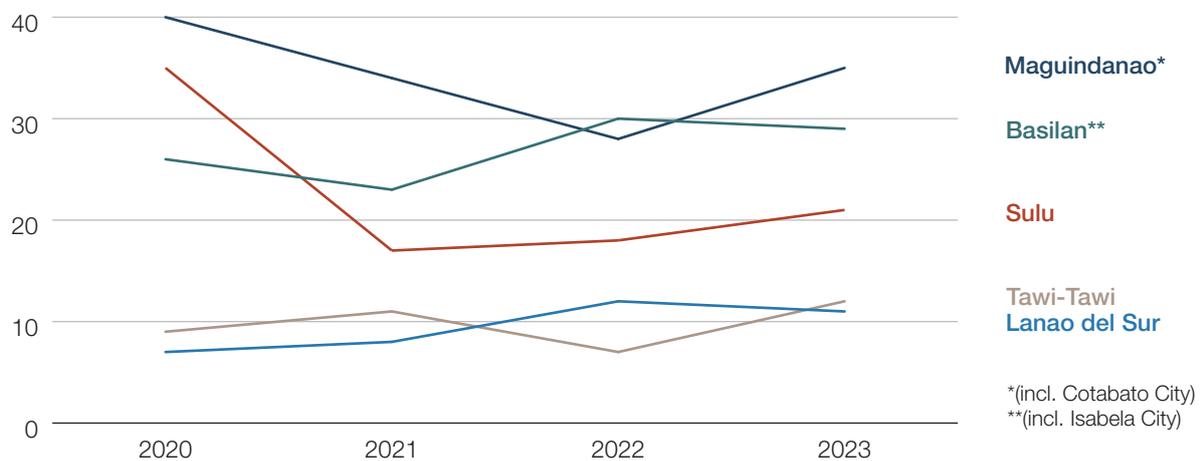
**Figure 7: Conflict deaths per 100,000 persons, by province, 2020-2023**



**Figure 8: Conflict incidence per 1,000 sq.km., by province, 2020-2023**



**Figure 9: Conflict deaths per 1,000 sq.km., by province, 2020-2023**



**Two**, the MILF acquired countervailing power and authority in the province when it assumed the reins of the new BARMM political authority in 2019.

However, with no effective decommissioning and demobilisation of its forces, collective acts of violence involving the MILF and its allies continued. The signing of the peace agreement and the establishment of the regional government did not end violence, it thrived under it.

Indeed, the MILF itself became a major source of violence and insecurity. Collective attacks waged by MILF commanders and other armed groups against state law enforcers are still reported regularly. The regional government and its law enforcement and peacebuilding instruments have failed to curtail the violence, including those directed against law enforcers themselves. These attacks included the targeting of policemen and soldiers who were engaged in the performance of their duties, such as enforcing warrants of arrest, or undertaking reconnaissance patrols, or buying food and other supplies (**Table 2**).

**Table 2: Conflict incidents and deaths, armed groups versus AFP and PNP, 2020-2023**

	Incidents	Deaths
2020	9	4
2021	4	1
2022	5	11
2023	9	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>29</b>

**Three**, much of the collective violence in the BARMM occurred in Maguindanao because the preponderance of vertical and horizontal attacks came from internal schisms and feuding within the MILF organization itself. The inability to contain the violence from within its own ranks expose the serious internal grievances within the MILF and the weak governance of the normalization process by both the government and the MILF. This has been a constant source

of fragility and instability and is well known to the various publics monitoring the conflict transition.

These violent flashpoints vary between those involving MILF commanders themselves, or those between MILF commanders engaged in clan feuding with their kins or other clans who are members of the BIFF or the MNLF, including so-called “rogue elements” and armed groups operating and circulating adjacent to or within the boundaries of MILF camps (**Table 3**).

**Table 3: Clan feuds involving MILF-affiliated actors, 2020-2023**

	Incidents	Deaths
2020	14	12
2021	3	1
2022	11	20
2023	9	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>43</b>

**Four**, most of the recent identity-related violence is also attributed to armed attacks waged by various rebel and private armed groups against rival ethnic groups, in particular the indigenous non-Moro tribes such as the Teduray-Lambangian and Dulangan-Manobo who are principally located in Maguindanao and adjacent provinces.

Land and other resource conflicts have fanned the violence against indigenous peoples. Recent attempts to institutionalize ancestral land claims have triggered a rush among outsiders to aggressively seize tribal lands and neutralize tribal leaders who are opposed to land grabbing. The incessant violence against IPs in the towns of Datu Odin Sinsuat, Upi, and South Upi in Maguindanao are signifiers of worse to come (**Table 4**).

Armed clashes between and among various groups and those asserting their rights to ancestral lands have led to the continued displacement of NMIPs. They have also been caught in the crossfire of political conflicts between rival factions during the past two elections. Since 2021, the number of NMIP families displaced have reached more than two thousand.

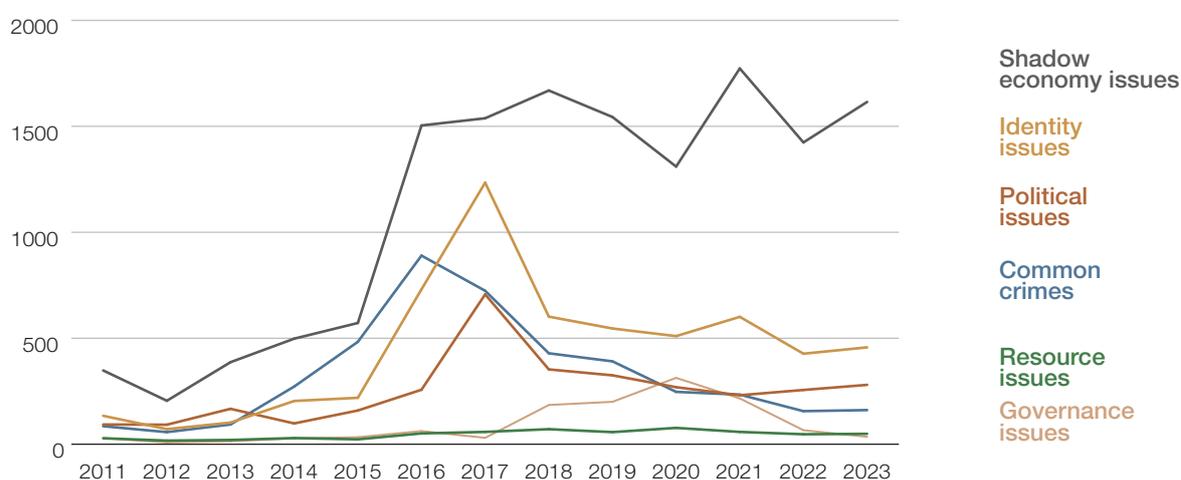
**Table 4: Incidents involving various rebel and private armed groups in contested ancestral lands, 2020-2023**

	Incidents	Deaths
2020	35	33
2021	33	22
2022	7	3
2023	5	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>62</b>

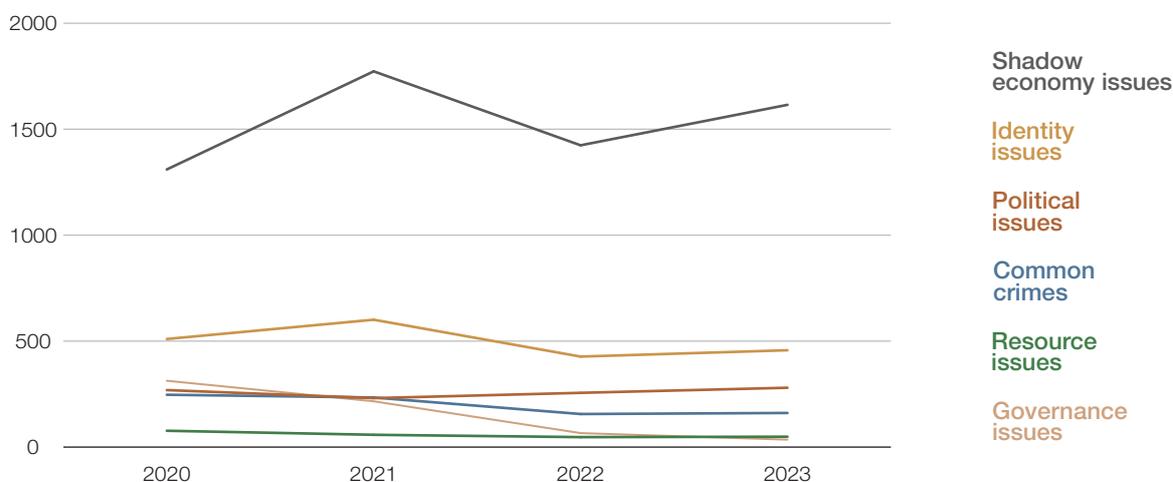
## Main and specific causes and costs of conflict

Shadow economy-related conflict sustained its characteristic as the major site of violent conflict, followed by identity-related conflicts. As in the past, illicit drugs and guns figured prominently among the shadow economy enterprises. Identity-related violence came second and included clan feuding over land and political office, persistent extremist violence, and violent political contestation (**Figures 10-11**).

**Figure 10: Main causes of conflict incidents, 2011-2023**



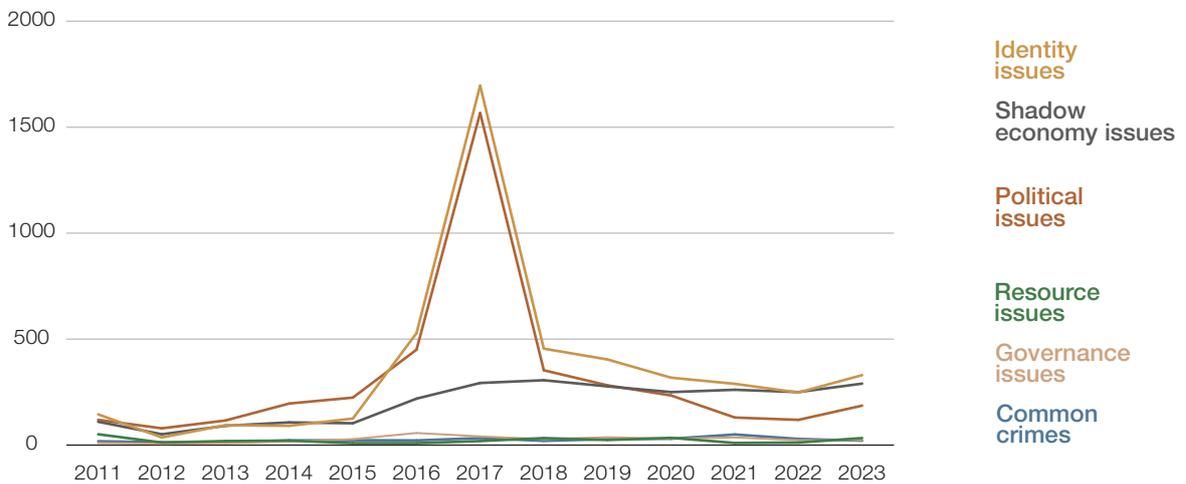
**Figure 11: Main causes of conflict incidents, 2020-2023**



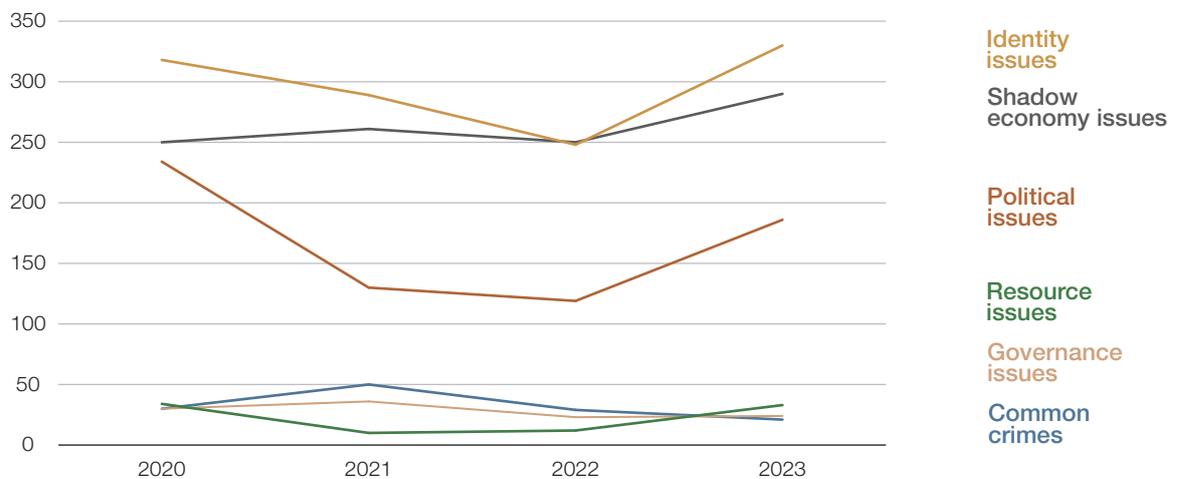
While the long-term (2011-2023) and short-term (2020-2023) figures below indicate the dominant role of shadow economies as the main cause of incidents, identity-related conflict was deadlier. The number of deaths from identity-related violence rose significantly to eclipse shadow economy and political violence at the end of 2023. By 2023, identity-related conflict became the major cause of death (Figures 12-13).

**“The number of deaths from identity-related violence rose significantly to eclipse shadow economy and political violence at the end of 2023.”**

**Figure 12: Main causes of conflict deaths, 2011-2023**



**Figure 13: Main causes of conflict deaths, 2020-2023**





A family navigates their way home by boat, a primary mode of transportation in the Ligawasan Marsh. Communities in and around the marsh face the dual challenges of conflict and extreme weather, including recurrent flooding that disrupts their education and livelihoods. August 2024. © Najib Zacaria

## Gender-based violence recedes

The post-pandemic period marks the beginning of a new decade of conflict monitoring in the Bangsamoro. Historically, gender-based violence (GBV) tend to mimic the overall conflict trend in the region. The three-year period follows a V shape, with only a slight decline in 2022 and an uptick in numbers in 2023. However, Conflict Alert data reveals a different picture of GBV and child abuse incidents for the years following the pandemic in 2021 to 2023.

The number rose to 134 incidents in 2021 compared to 102 reported incidents of GBV in 2020, before it sharply dropped to just 33 incidents in 2022—a notable decrease of 75 percent from 2021. The trend persisted with a subsequent decrease to 17 incidents in 2023, reflecting a 48 percent decline from 2022. Similarly, the number of child abuse cases has seen a significant decline, plummeting from 71 incidents in 2021 to a mere three incidents in both 2022 and 2023 (**Figure 14**).

Most of the 184 reported gender-related incidents from 2021 to 2023 were rape cases and arrests at 42 percent and 23 percent, respectively. Other manifestations include grave coercion, sexual molestation, domestic violence, and murder cases. The trend is similar when it comes to child abuse cases. For the 77 cases, 58 percent were

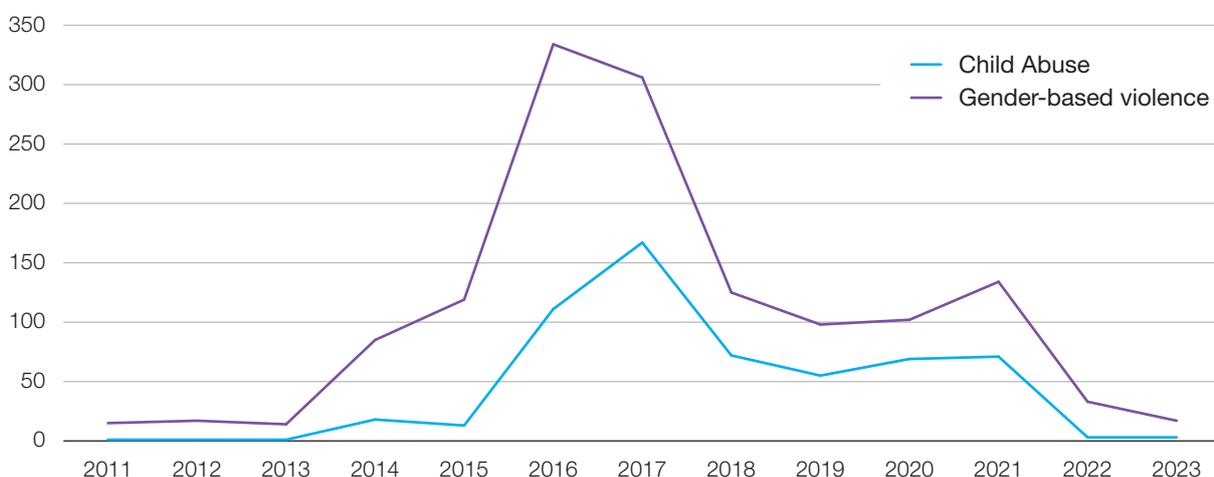
rape cases, 16 percent sexual molestation, 9 percent assault and grave coercion.

Examining the geographical distribution of GBV cases, **Figure 15** highlights the notable increase in incidents across all BARMM provinces in 2021, except in Sulu. As in previous years, GBV incidents continued to be predominantly concentrated in urban areas like the cities of Cotabato, Isabela, and Lamitan, as well as in the peri-urban areas of Upi, South Upi, and Datu Odin Sinsuat in Maguindanao.

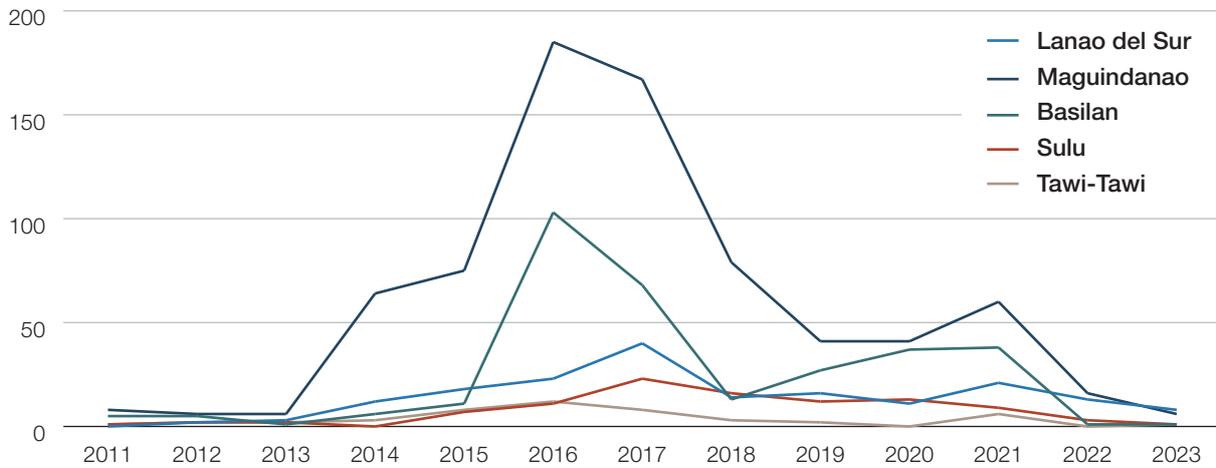
In 2022, there was a significant decrease in gender-related incidents in all provinces. Interestingly, there was only one recorded incident in Basilan and none at all in Tawi-Tawi. The trend remained consistent. As of 2023, the number of GBV has shown a consistent decline, with only one reported incident each in the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. The provinces of Basilan and Maguindanao showed the largest decrease in numbers, causing the overall trend to go down. It is interesting to observe that both Tawi-Tawi and Sulu have consistently maintained low levels of GBV incidents. Tawi-Tawi, in particular, has experienced consistently low levels since 2017, with single digit numbers being recorded. Similarly, Sulu has shown a downward trend since 2017.

**Figure 16** illustrates the trend in gender-based violence over three distinct time periods: the period during martial law in Mindanao, the

**Figure 14: Gender-based and child abuse incidents, 2011-2023**



**Figure 15: Gender-based violence by province, 2011-2023**



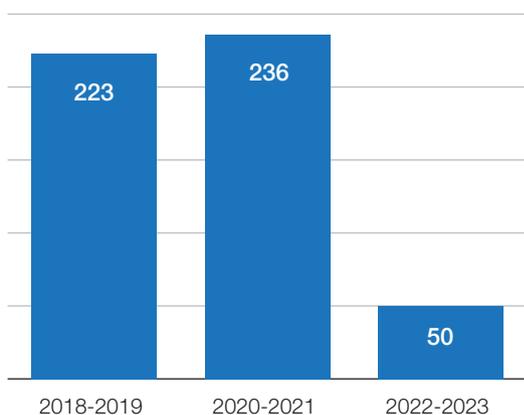
COVID-19 pandemic, and the post-pandemic scenario. The data shows an initial increase in incidents of gender-based violence, with 223 cases reported in 2018 to 2019 and a rise to 236 cases in 2020 to 2021. However, there is a significant decline in the most recent period, 2022 to 2023, where the number of reported cases drops sharply to just 50. This indicates a substantial reduction in GBV in the most recent period compared to the previous years.

The sharp decline in GBV and child abuse cases in 2022 and 2023 raises important questions about the factors driving this significant

reduction. One possible explanation lies in the periods of restrictions imposed by martial law in Mindanao following the Marawi siege in 2018. Although martial law was lifted by the end of 2019, COVID-19 lockdowns continued to confine women and children to their homes, limiting their exposure to public spaces but potentially increasing domestic risks.

Additionally, the displacements caused by the Marawi siege and ongoing armed encounters in mainland provinces heightened the vulnerability of women to abuse during this time. The fact that rape and assault cases constitute the highest number of incidents in this six-year period underscores the severe risks faced by women in conflict and displacement settings.

**Figure 16: Gender-based violence by two-year periods: 2018 to 2019, 2020 to 2021, 2022 to 2023**



The significant drop in cases by 2022 suggests that the easing of restrictions, combined with possible changes in conditions of women or reporting mechanisms, may have played a role in this decrease. However, it also signals the need to understand the complexities behind these trends to ensure better protection for vulnerable populations.

Conflict Alert validation sessions with MSVGs and analytical meetings with local partners also reveal that cases settled at the village level lead to their deletion from official records. This practice may be beneficial to local government

units (LGUs) for various reasons, including the pursuit of awards and incentives such as the Seal of Good Local Governance (SGLG), child-friendly zones, and GADtimpala (Gender and Development awards). Notably, the number of BARMM LGUs awarded the SGLG increased from 14 in 2022 to 28 in 2023.<sup>6</sup>

The downward trend also coincides with the enactment of Republic Act (RA) 11596, a law prohibiting child marriage in the Philippines, which came into effect on December 10, 2021. Similar to RA 9262, the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act, this legislation may have inadvertently contributed to underreporting due to cultural norms and fears of legal repercussions for families involved.

### Male and female involvement in violent conflict

From 2021 to 2023, more females were embroiled in shadow economy issues than in identity issues where GBV incidents are classified. It was a similar case for men. In terms of specific issues, both females and males were involved in illegal weapons, illegal drugs, illegal gambling, and illicit financial transactions (shadow economy issues); elections (political issues); personal grudge, clan feud, violent extremism, and gender-related issues (identity issues); and robbery, carjacking, and damage to properties (common crimes).

Most females were involved in gender-related issues in 2021 but this shifted to illegal drugs in 2022, and to illegal weapons in 2023. Among males, most were involved in illegal drugs and illegal weapons from 2021 to 2023. There was a notable rise in female and male involvement in election-related conflicts in 2023, coinciding with the particularly violent October barangay election.

Further dissecting female involvement would reveal the complex role of women especially in shadow economy issues and violent extremism. They were often victims in cases of illegal

weapons, GBV, robbery, personal grudge, and clan feuding. In 2021, they were primarily victims of GBV, but from 2022 to 2023, they had become victims of violence related to illegal weapons. However, as alleged perpetrators, women were primarily involved in illegal drugs, illegal gambling, illegal weapons, elections, and violent extremism.

Males, on the other hand, were often victims of incidents involving illegal weapons, personal grudges, elections, clan feuds, and robbery. As alleged perpetrators, they were involved in illegal drugs, illegal weapons, illegal gambling, elections, and identity issues like personal grudges and clan feuds.

## Identity and land conflicts

As aforementioned, a key aspect of identity-related conflict concerns land and political violence against indigenous peoples. Violent polarization between Muslims and Christians is the vicious side effect of the confluence between identity, resource, and political violence. This is manifested by the number of assassinations, random physical attacks, and indiscriminate bombings using IEDs, particularly in the SGA that were recently incorporated into the BARMM.

Land conflicts have also been deadlier from 2021 to 2023 as clashes escalated between various land claimants. Tensions arose from indigenous land claims and settler protests—highlighted by the exclusion of the distinct land rights of the NMIPs and the illegal landgrab of ancestral lands through the use of existing land tenure instruments to legitimize the forceful transfer of land to illegitimate claimants.<sup>7</sup> Added tensions and violence are also reported from the application and implementation of camps transformation and investment projects—including areas supported by foreign development assistance.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG). Seal of Good Local Governance 2023 Awardees. 2023. [https://dilg.gov.ph/PDF\\_File/reports\\_resources/dilg-reports-resources-2023122\\_da533a136c.pdf](https://dilg.gov.ph/PDF_File/reports_resources/dilg-reports-resources-2023122_da533a136c.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Such as the use of agrarian reform community rights, natural resource tenurial arrangements, including the declaration of military reservations.



**Moro and NMIP farmers** in Datu Salibo and South Upi, Maguindanao del Sur, face constant uncertainty due to armed clashes and conflicts, leading to their displacement. These **photos by Amiel Cagayan**, taken in March 2021 and June 2022, capture the harsh realities faced by farmers and evacuees in volatile areas of the Bangsamoro.

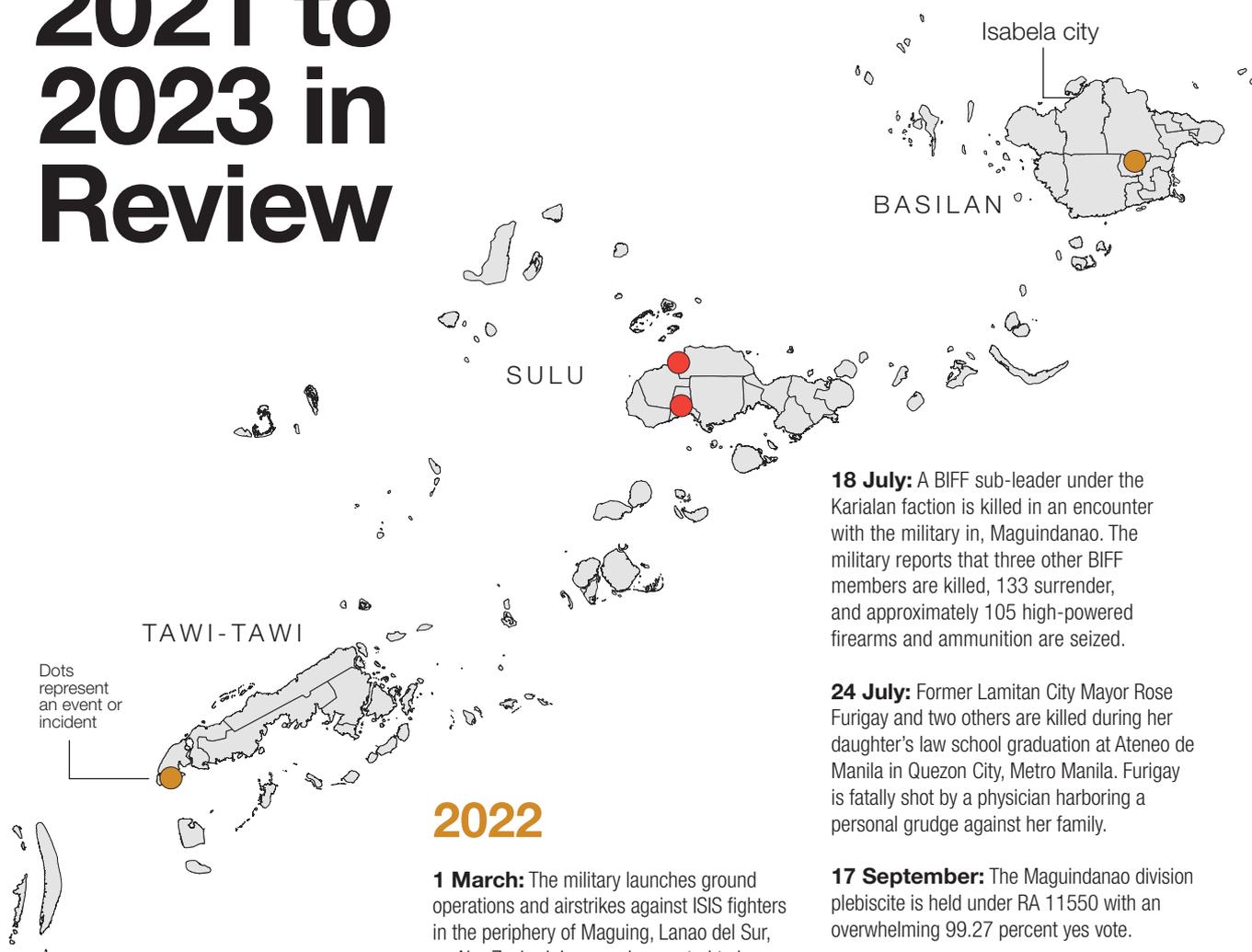
The **first photo** shows an elderly woman in Brgy. Pandi, Datu Salibo, drying leftover rice for the next meal, highlighting the resourcefulness of displaced communities.

The **second image** depicts Teduray farmers loading corn onto a horse for sale at the barangay center in Brgy. Romongaob, South Upi. Many displaced Tedurays walk long distances to sell their produce.



The **third image**, shows an evacuee clearing weeds from a vacant lot near their temporary shelter in Brgy. Pandi, Datu Salibo, to grow vegetables for his family's sustenance.

# 2021 to 2023 in Review



## 2021

**18 March:** Clashes between the Philippine Army and the BIFF in the SPMS Box, Maguindanao displace at least 13,570 families.

**8 May:** Around 200 heavily-armed members of the BIFF Karialan faction occupy the public market in Datu Paglas, Maguindanao for several hours.

**21 May:** RA 11550, an Act dividing the province of Maguindanao into two provinces, Maguindanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Norte, is enacted into law.

**28 October:** President Rodrigo Duterte officially signs RA No. 11593, extending the transition of the BARMM from 2022 to 2025 and postponing the first regional parliamentary elections.

## 2022

**1 March:** The military launches ground operations and airstrikes against ISIS fighters in the periphery of Maguing, Lanao del Sur, as Abu Zacharia's group is reported to be massing forces in the area. The BTA later clarifies that the area was an MILF camp.

**13 April:** RA 11696, also known as the Marawi Siege Compensation Act of 2022, is enacted into law, establishing the MCB and the legal framework for compensating losses and damages to properties and lives.

**19 April:** Military clashes with the 105th MILF Base Command in Maguindanao during a combat patrol operation. The MILF commander is killed in the encounter. OPAPRU calls for a stand down as part of the ceasefire mechanism under the GPH-MILF agreement.

**23 April:** Presidential candidate Leni Robredo secures the support of UBJP. Chief Minister Ebrahim Murad raises Robredo's hand during a ceremony in Camp Darapanan.

**9 May:** The 2022 Philippine general election saw Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. win by a landslide, capturing 60 percent of the votes and becoming the 17th president of the Philippines.



**18 July:** A BIFF sub-leader under the Karialan faction is killed in an encounter with the military in, Maguindanao. The military reports that three other BIFF members are killed, 133 surrender, and approximately 105 high-powered firearms and ammunition are seized.

**24 July:** Former Lamitan City Mayor Rose Furigay and two others are killed during her daughter's law school graduation at Ateneo de Manila in Quezon City, Metro Manila. Furigay is fatally shot by a physician harboring a personal grudge against her family.

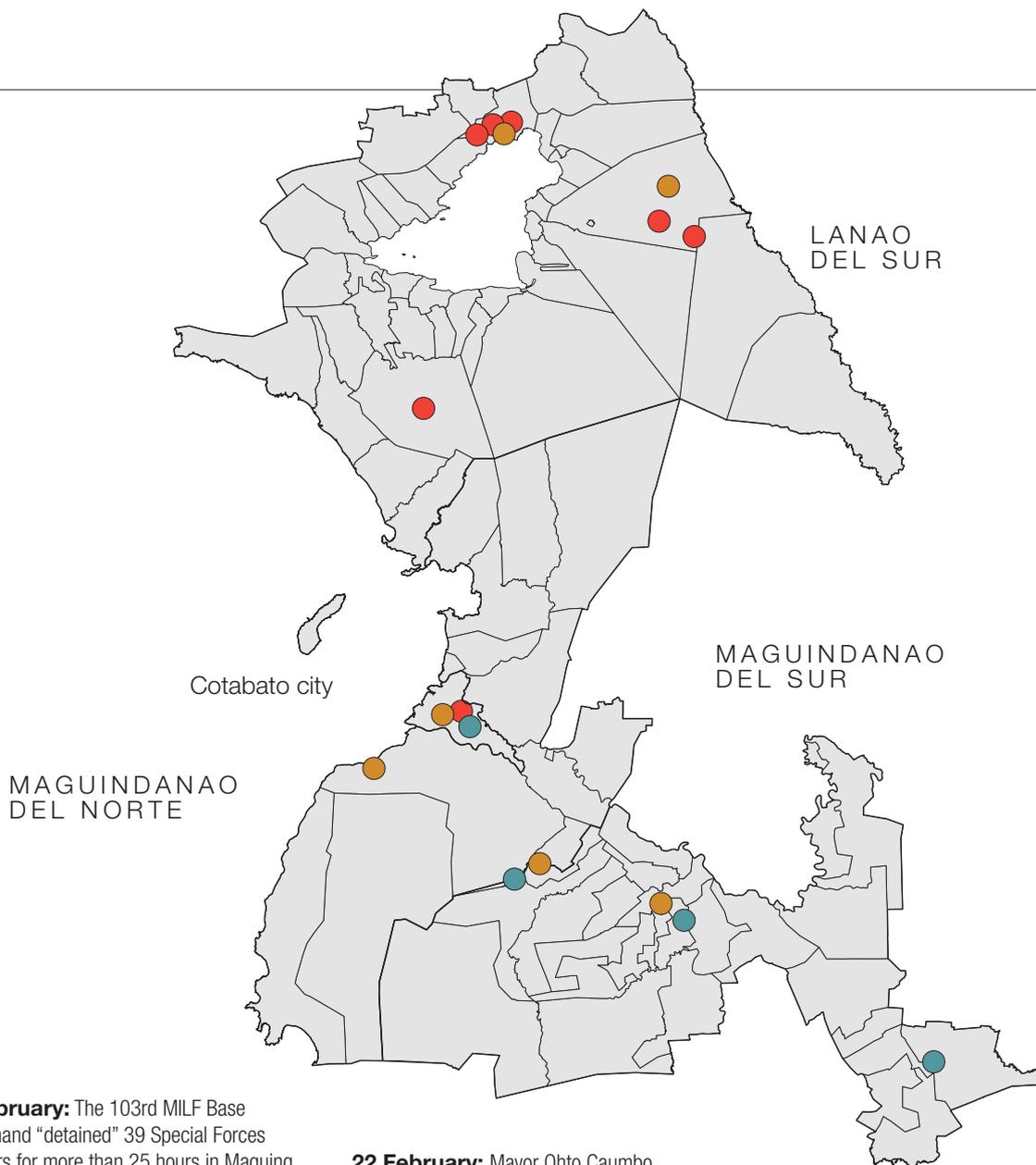
**17 September:** The Maguindanao division plebiscite is held under RA 11550 with an overwhelming 99.27 percent yes vote.

**28 October:** Typhoon Paeng causes massive flooding and landslides in Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao, killing at least 66 people, mostly from the Teduray-Lambangian tribe. Landslides along the foothills of Mt. Minandar claim the lives of at least 27 Tedurays in a resettlement area where locals were forced to relocate in 2020.

**8 November:** Seven people are killed and 12 are injured in fierce clashes between MILF forces and the military in Basilan. More than 1,450 families are displaced. The military accuses the MILF of protecting the suspects of recent bomb attacks. Each side blames the other for violating the terms of the 2014 peace agreement.

## 2023

**6 February:** President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. appoints an all-Maranao MCB. In 2022, the DBM committed P1 billion in the 2023 budget to implement the compensation law.



**7 February:** The 103rd MILF Base Command “detained” 39 Special Forces soldiers for more than 25 hours in Maguing, Lanao del Sur as they passed through the area after an operation against NPA rebels in the border area with Bukidnon. The MILF states that the “MILF commanders merely asked the Army to voluntarily put aside their firearms while the matter was being discussed.”

**17 February:** Policemen destroy a marijuana plantation in Maguing, Lanao del Sur uprooting and burning some 25,000 fully grown marijuana plants worth PHP5 million. Just a week earlier, police arrest two big-time drug traders at a checkpoint in the same village, seizing 125 grams of shabu worth PHP 850,000.

**17 February:** Lanao del Sur Governor Mamintal “Bombit” Adiong, Jr. and his seven-convoy vehicle is ambushed in Maguing, Lanao del Sur, wounding him and a member of his aide, while four of his police escorts are killed. The town where the ambush occurred is notorious for drug trading. In 2022, authorities destroyed marijuana plants worth P17 million in the same area.

**22 February:** Mayor Ohto Caumbo Montawal of the newly created Maguindanao del Sur province is wounded by shots fired from a motorcycle in Pasay City, Metro Manila. Mayor Montawal is in town to attend the general assembly of the League of Municipalities of the Philippines.

**23 February:** PNP Chief Rodolfo Azurin Jr. orders all police regional directors to assess PNP security provision following the series of attacks against local officials of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, and Aparri, Cagayan between February 17 and 22, 2023.

**27 May:** At least 259 families evacuate in Marogong, Lanao del Sur, fearing terrorist attacks after DI Emir Abu Zacharia issues an ultimatum for the release of captured DI members. The incident occurs after the launch of Task Force Marawi, an inter-agency force addressing terrorism, illegal drug trade, and other crimes in the area.

**14 June:** Abu Zacharia is killed in a raid in Marawi City. The police and military are gearing up for possible retaliatory attacks.

**24 June:** The group of former Maimbung, Sulu Vice Mayor Pando Mudjasan clashes with government troops during the serving of his arrest warrant for multiple murder and illegal possession of firearms and explosives. Six people die, and more than 6,000 families evacuate.

**8 September:** The Provincial Peace and Order Council of Sulu issues a resolution declaring the province ASG-free.

**30 October:** Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan elections are held after five years of postponement. The PNP notes that this election is the most violent since 2010, with the highest incidents occurring in the BARMM.

**3 December:** A bomb explodes during a Catholic mass at the Dimaporo gymnasium inside Mindanao State University (MSU) Marawi City, killing at least four people and wounding several others. ISIS claims responsibility for the attack.

**BOX 1**

# Sulu finds peace

**Maureen Anthea Lacuesta**

The province of Sulu in the Bangsamoro region has often been portrayed as one of the deadliest and most dangerous provinces in the country due to rebellion and terrorism; kidnapping, extortion, and political assassinations; violent clan feuding; and armed clashes between the private armed groups. The province suffered from the years of vertical conflict between the government and the separatist group MNLF in the 1970s and the ASG from the 1990s to the 2000s.

However, the past five years saw a steep reversal in violence in the province and the onset of a tentative yet stable peace. The decrease in violence suggests that the province is on its way to a more sustained developmental trajectory, even as it navigates its complex political relationship with the broader Bangsamoro region and its transition authority.

Sulu was the lone province that voted “no” to integration with the BARMM during the 2019 plebiscite that created the new regional authority. Hence, Sulu did not expect nor receive much favor nor funding from the regional government. Yet Sulu bested the other BARMM provinces in terms of poverty reduction according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

Sulu’s poverty rate has declined to 41.5 percent in 2021 bolstered by improvements in labor incomes and improving further to 13 percent in 2023 (World Bank 2024; PSA 2024). The reduction in poverty was accompanied by a consistent downward trend in conflict incidence that was recorded during the 2022 national elections when Sulu recorded the ‘most peaceful’ elections in its history. <sup>a</sup>

In September 2023, authorities declared the province as ASG-free after decades-long of conflict involving the terrorist group <sup>b</sup>.

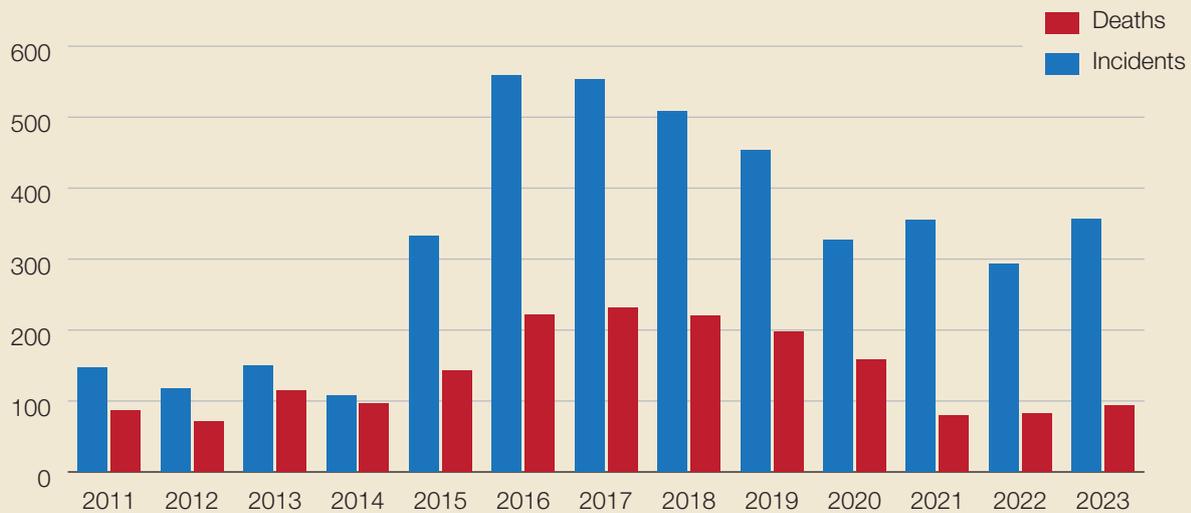
## Conflict deaths return to pre-2015 levels

Conflict incidents in Sulu peaked in 2016, when armed groups such as the ASG pledged allegiance to ISIS and when former president Rodrigo Duterte launched his “war on drugs” campaign (**Figure A**). The numbers started to decline in 2018 when martial law was enforced in Mindanao until the end of 2019, during and after the war in Marawi.

Martial law restrictions on people were immediately replaced with the imposition of stringent lockdown measures throughout the country due to the Covid-19 pandemic until 2020. Incidents of conflict in the province would follow the overall trend across the region, which rebounded in 2021, declined in 2022 before surging again in 2023.

<sup>a</sup> Sulu holds ‘most peaceful’ election in local history. 11 May 2022. <https://www.bworldonline.com/the-nation/2022/05/11/447881/sulu-holds-most-peaceful-election-in-local-history-5-arrested-in-cotabato-city/>

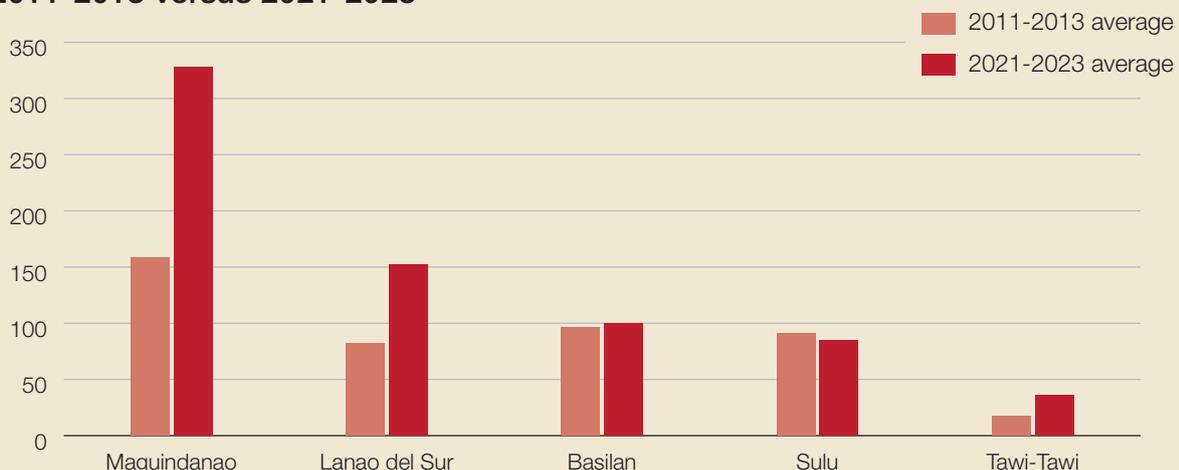
<sup>b</sup> Gov’t body declares Sulu ‘Abu Sayyaf-free’. 11 September 2023. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1829559/govt-body-declares-sulu-abu-sayyaf-free>

**Figure A: Conflict incidents and deaths in Sulu, 2011-2023**

It is a different story, however, if we look at the human cost of violence in the province. The number of deaths had dramatically decreased by 50 percent from 158 deaths in 2020 to 79 in 2021. This would vary slightly between 2021 to 2023, but the average remained around 85 deaths for this three-year period.

In fact, these numbers are even lower than the average number of deaths from 2011 to 2013 in Sulu. The province stands apart from other Bangsamoro provinces, as it recorded lower average number of deaths from 2021 to 2023 compared to the first three years 2011 to 2013 when Conflict Alert started its monitoring work (**Figure B**).

There has also been a significant shift when measuring the conflict deaths per 100,000 persons and 1,000 sq.km. In terms of deaths per 1,000 sq.km., Sulu had always placed at second beginning in 2016, attaining first in 2018 and 2019 when suicide bombings due to violent extremism gained prominence in the region. Sulu has seen dramatic improvements in its magnitude of violence, falling into third place, beginning in 2021 through 2023 compared to other provinces in the region (**see Figure 9, p. 7**).

**Figure B: Conflict deaths by province, average three-year period, 2011-2013 versus 2021-2023**

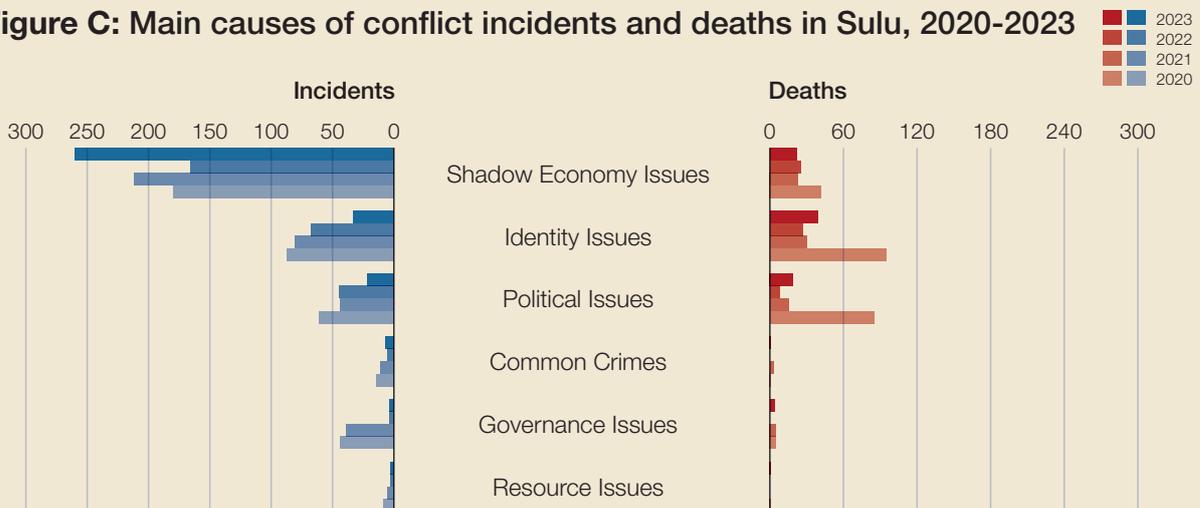
\* (incl Isabela City) \*\* (incl Cotabato City)

Sulu achieved the highest feat when it placed the lowest out of all the provinces in the BARMM when it comes to conflict deaths per 100,000 persons in 2021 and 2023, a rank that Tawi-Tawi had historically held since 2011.

## Shadow economies of drugs and weapons rear their heads

There has also been a shift in the causes of conflict incidents and deaths in Sulu. In what has historically been a hotspot for identity-related conflict, particularly violent extremism (see p. 36), the shadow economy of illegal drugs, illegal gambling, and illegal weapons had become the prominent cause of conflict incidents in the province from 2021 to 2023 (Figure C).

**Figure C: Main causes of conflict incidents and deaths in Sulu, 2020-2023**



The authorities intensified the crackdown on illegal drugs in 2021 and 2023, which yielded higher numbers of conflict incidents during the two years. Conflict incidents due to identity-related conflict began to fall in 2018 and had continuously decreased until 2023.

Identity and political-related deaths slightly increased in 2023 as the military intensified their operations against the ASG. The rise in identity-related fatalities is also coupled with the increase in deaths due to clan feuding.

More importantly, election-related violence has seen notable declines in Sulu, particularly in the 2022 national elections and the 2023 BSK elections (see p. 41). This portends less election-related violence in the first regional elections in 2025.

All is not rosy though, as illicit weapons continued to weigh heavily as a top specific source of conflict deaths in Sulu. Access to illicit weapons had become more lethal, with the average numbers of conflict deaths quadrupled from 2020 to 2023 as compared to the period from 2016 to 2019.

## Strengthened local governance

The significant declines in both conflict incidents and deaths are a cause for celebration and offer an important insight into the factors that caused and contributed to the peace that Sulu is experiencing today. Sulu offers a lesson for the wider Bangsamoro region. Understanding why it was able to get out of its cycle of violence needs deeper understanding and subsequent promotion. It is a veritable source of new models and frameworks that can effectively address the complex conflict dynamics of the region.

In depth interviews and community feedback point to the strong cooperation and collaboration done by the local governments and the security forces in thwarting armed groups, including the ASG, in the past few years. The military replicated a vigorous program to thwart violent extremism (PAVE) that was first introduced in Basilan. Sulu's own localized social integration program enables former violent extremists to return to their communities. They have likewise intensified their Balik Barangay Program, which assists those who have been affected by years-long of conflict, particularly the internally displaced persons, to also return to their families and communities.<sup>c</sup> According to their program, more than 5,000 individuals who have been displaced in Patikul, a stronghold of the ASG, were finally able to go back home (UNHCR 2020).

It is interesting that the provincial and local governments in Sulu were able to achieve this by implementing responsive bespoke programs that were autonomously developed. These include livelihoods engaging the robust cross-border trade in Sulu's porous borders as a source of reintegration benefits.

Sulu has been recognized only once in the SGLG awards of the BARMM in 2023, despite its achievements.<sup>d</sup> This speaks a lot about the misplaced incentives and rewards that do not reach governance models that effectively deliver growth and development with little fanfare.

Likewise, settlements and mediations are being strengthened by local politicians and strongmen to resolve clan feuding between families in Sulu. In 2021, an amicable settlement was made between the two "political giants" of the Tan and Arbison families, ending their feud that has lasted for years.<sup>e</sup> Just recently, in March 2024, another settlement was reached between two feuding clans that had been prolonged for nearly five decades. These settlements were crucial in maintaining peace and order in the province, especially in the previous two electoral battles in the country and in the upcoming parliamentary elections in the BARMM.

These developments reveal how the BARMM regional authority can still achieve a stable peace and an inclusive developmental strategy for the rest of the region. It will have to delve deep into the experiences of the only province that did not want to join the BARMM. Isn't it ironic?



<sup>c</sup> The Balik Barangay Program is a joint collaboration of the Sulu Provincial Government, Municipal Government of Patikul, and other government agencies including the AFP.

<sup>d</sup> The municipality of Talipao is the lone SGLG awardee in the entire province of Sulu in 2023. Twenty (20) out of 26 municipalities who obtained an SGLG recognition are in Maguindanao

<sup>e</sup> It was said that Sulu Governor Abdusakur Tan himself led the settlement to end their decades-long misunderstanding with his former political rival, Sulu 2nd District Representative Munir Arbison.

**BOX 2**

# Deadly wait for a Bangsamoro Land Law

**Deanne Louise Capiral**

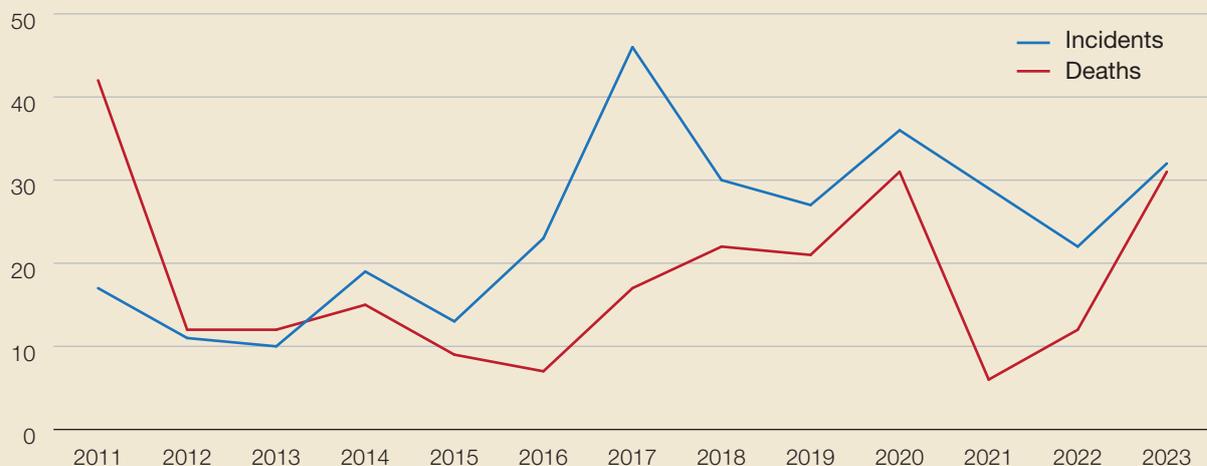
Land is a central issue the BOL seeks to address. The transitional justice provision of the law mandates the creation of a mechanism that will address the grievances of the Bangsamoro people and indigenous peoples on land tenure and property rights. However, five years after its ratification, the creation of a Bangsamoro Land Law is still awaited. The lack of a mechanism that consolidates formal and informal land policies and arrangements fuel the persistence of land conflicts and data has shown they have turned deadlier, especially in 2023.

## Surge in land conflicts

In that year, land conflicts resumed an upward trajectory after falling in the past two years as land claimants hardened their positions amid development initiatives, particularly in areas the MILF has claimed as strongholds but the IPs have asserted as their ancestral domain.

There were 32 incidents and 31 deaths in 2023, nearly mirroring the 36 incidents and 31 deaths recorded in 2020 (**Figure D**). Fifty-eight percent (58%) of incidents in 2023 took place in Maguindanao, which encompasses the city of Cotabato and the present-day provinces of Maguindanao del Norte and Maguindanao del Sur. Those incidents claimed nearly 90 percent of total deaths, underscoring the lethality of conflicts when those involved are weaponed and mediation fails, or worse, is missing.

**Figure D: Incidents and deaths due to land conflicts in the Bangsamoro, 2011-2023**



Hotspots for land conflicts in Maguindanao are municipalities with rich agricultural land that have been severely marked by past instances of conflicts that get resurrected time and again sans resolution. These include South Upi, Upi, Sultan Kudarat, and Datu Odin Sinsuat in Maguindanao del Norte; and Ampatuan, Pagalungan, Rajah Buayan, Guindulungan, and Gen. S. K. Pendatun in Maguindanao del Sur.

In these places, animosities between families and clans over land have boiled over into firefights. Factions of the MILF, MNLF, and BIFF have, time and again, trained their men and weapons against each other in their claim to swathes of land. These armed groups—as well as Maguindanaon families—have also besieged the Teduray-Lambangian IPs that claim thousands of hectares of land as their ancestral domain.

Firefights between armed groups have been very costly. For instance, clashes between MILF and MNLF members resulted in 15 out of the 31 total deaths in 2023 and displaced hundreds of families.

Meanwhile, armed groups' attacks on the Teduray-Lambangian, especially those from South Upi, not only have resulted in deaths and destruction of property but also prolonged displacement. As of 2024, at least 3,000 households have remained displaced according to data of the Timuay Justice and Governance, the Indigenous Political Structure (IPS) that represents the Teduray and Lambangian in the Bangsamoro and central Mindanao. The violence has continued despite Teduray and Lambangian leaders having attended congressional hearings in 2021 to expose the atrocities, particularly by the BIFF and MILF, and the inability or reluctance of the Bangsamoro government to protect their people. The NMIPs fear they will eventually lose their ancestral domain if the land conflicts are not resolved and if an Indigenous Peoples Code that recognizes their ancestral domain is not passed.

## Overlaps in land claims

The NMIP's concerns have become more salient and urgent as MILF camps Omar and Badr are being developed, in line with the Normalization Annex of the CAB. The NMIP's ancestral domain claim overlap with the center and core areas of the two camps. Already, multiple conflict incidents have been recorded.

Development programs or projects introduced within ancestral domains must follow national policies, most especially the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) which mandates securing the free, prior and informed consent of NMIPs and their IPS. Thus, it is imperative for all agencies and organizations involved in the Camps Transformation Project to follow the IPRA and the customary laws of NMIPs. Furthermore, development programs introduced in ancestral domain areas must equally benefit the NMIP communities.

## Conclusion

Conflict data shows that land conflicts continue to be deadly, especially in Maguindanao. These conflicts not only exact human cost in the form of deaths and displacement but also disrupt the normal life and development of communities. Three actions are imperative.

**First**, the persistence of violence and human cost due to land conflict proves the pressing and urgent need to create a Bangsamoro Land Law that will create a system that considers all land laws, policies, and formal and informal arrangements. The law should also strengthen the conflict sensitivity of programs and projects in the region.

**Second**, while waiting for a Bangsamoro Land Law, policies, projects, and mechanisms related to land such as the Indigenous Peoples Code, camps transformation, proposed mineral reservations, and other development projects must consider the multiple formal and informal rule systems and arrangements on land in the Bangsamoro. Billions have been poured through block grants and international aid for the region. Sensitivity on land issues is important to ensure sustainability and long-term development from these massive resources.

**Third**, the protection of NMIPs and their leaders who are only voicing out their rights to their ancestral domains is urgent. Congress needs to conduct more hearings and call on concerned agencies and the security sector to act on the deaths and displacement happening within NMIP communities.

The issue of land is intertwined with the development of communities. Without sensitivity on this, more conflict and disruption and destruction of lives will ensue, instead of the intended development of people's lives.



Members of the Teduray-Lambangian indigenous tribe continue to call for the urgent passage of a Non-Moro Indigenous Peoples (NMIP) Code to protect and uphold their rights in the Bangsamoro region. Despite being a priority for the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, the Code has yet to be enacted. 22 April 2022. 📍 **Timuay Justice and Governance**



**BOX 3**

# Divide and rule: The split of Maguindanao

**Maureen Anthea Lacuesta**

Maguindanao province was divided into two – Maguindanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Norte – following a plebiscite on September 17, 2022, more than four months after the May 9 national elections. The division of Maguindanao was supposedly aimed at speeding up the development and delivery of social services to communities in Maguindanao.<sup>f</sup>

However, the gerrymandering of political jurisdictions through the division of municipalities, districts, or provinces have also been used in the past to prevent rido or clan feuding between warring clans and families. Land could be apportioned to those with no properties of their own, or worse, grab from those with legitimate land claims and transfer these to others to weaken those claims. Besides, the creation of new political jurisdictions enabled access to internal revenue allotments (IRA) that were distributed by the State to these new areas.

The latter strategy seems to be in play in the case of Maguindanao—a province that has seen multiple successful gerrymandering initiatives to strengthen clan and related vested interests over others. More than three decades ago, the Andal Ampatuan clan went about subdividing areas to apportion land to his children and relatives.<sup>g</sup> He gave the names of his children to these new towns and carved them out even though the land and population sizes of these areas did not meet the requirements for new cities and municipalities.

## Covet new territory

The division of Maguindanao is motivated by the desire to weaken the legitimate ancestral land claims of the non-Moro indigenous peoples (NMIP) and the craving for territories to create new fiefdoms for newly emerging strongmen

Maguindanao del Norte covers twelve municipalities mostly surrounding Cotabato City, including the Iranun Corridor.<sup>h</sup> Maguindanao del Sur, on the other hand, comprises 24 municipalities, which encompasses the SPMS Box and those surrounding the Liguasan Marsh. The Teduray-Lambangian NMIP would be most affected by this split though, as their ancestral domain claim had been divided and spread across Norte and Sur. Meanwhile, Cotabato City remains a lone legislative district of Maguindanao del Norte (**Map 1**).

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<sup>f</sup> In a press release on 19 September 2022, Senator Francis Tolentino, the proponent of R.A. 11550, said the division aims to “accelerate not only the economic, political, and social development of Maguindanao, but also the efficiency of delivery of government services.” Source: [https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press\\_release/2022/0919\\_tolentino1.asp](https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2022/0919_tolentino1.asp)

<sup>g</sup> Lara, Francisco Jr. 2010. Collusion and collision in Muslim Mindanao. The Maguindanao Massacre and the Rise of Warlord Clans. In *The Maguindanao Massacre and the Rise of Warlord Clans*. Philippines: Institute for Autonomy and Governance.

<sup>h</sup> The Iranun Corridor consists of the municipalities of Parang, Matanog, Barira and Buldon.

**Map 1.** Maguindanao del Norte and Maguindanao del Sur

The division of Maguindanao in 2022 and its aftermath did not come easy. The governorship of Maguindanao del Norte was highly contested by two opposing political groups – the MILF-led United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP) and the political alliance of Maguindanao del Sur Governor Bai Mariam Sangki-Mangudadatu and the Sinsuats.<sup>i</sup>

The UBJP fielded their own nominee as Maguindanao Norte Governor in the person of Abdulraof Macacua, a Member of Parliament and one of the senior leaders of MILF. Meanwhile, the traditional and powerful Maguindanao clans wanted Bai Fatima Ainee Sinsuat, who was the elected Vice Governor of the undivided Maguindanao, as the head of the province. President Marcos Jr. eventually appointed the former as the Governor of Maguindanao del Norte.

<sup>i</sup> Bai Mariam Sangki-Mangudadatu won as Governor of Maguindanao during the May 2022 national elections, prior to the plebiscite to split Maguindanao province. Bai Fatima Ainee Sinsuat, who won as Vice Governor of the undivided Maguindanao, was supposed to take over Maguindanao del Norte but was disputed by the UBJP.

The battle for control over the division of the province promptly exacerbated the existing violence in the area and triggered divisions and clashes between and among armed groups in the province during the local barangay elections.

## More incidents in the north, but deadlier in the south

Over the course of thirteen years, Conflict Alert data revealed that the municipalities of Datu Odin Sinsuat, Parang, and Sultan Kudarat historically had the highest number of conflict incidents in the undivided Maguindanao. This may be attributed to their role as economic hubs and provincial centers. Similarly, the violence can also be linked to the fact that Datu Odin Sinsuat is the most populous municipality in the entire Maguindanao, according to the 2020 census of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA). It is closely followed by Sultan Kudarat and Parang.<sup>j</sup> These municipalities are now part of the province of Maguindanao del Norte after the split.

The shadow economy of illicit drugs and illegal weapons topped the specific cause of conflict incidents in both Maguindanao del Norte and Sur. Identity issues such as personal grudges and clan feuding were found to be equally prevalent in both provinces but in the 2023 village polls, Maguindanao del Norte proved to be more violent. Datu Odin Sinsuat and Sultan Kudarat remained at the top in 2022 and 2023, partly because they became political hotspots when their local chief executives did not align with the UBJP during the 2022 and 2023 elections.<sup>k</sup>

When it comes to human cost, the municipalities located in the southern part of the undivided Maguindanao, now Maguindanao del Sur, consistently had a higher number of deaths due to both vertical and horizontal conflicts. The municipalities of Ampatuan, Shariff Aguak, Mamasapano, and Pagalungan topped the list with the highest human cost in the entire Maguindanao. There was a noticeable increase in incidents of violent extremism in the area where the SPMS Box is located, resulting in a higher number of deaths and displacements. Several armed groups such as the BIFF, base commands of the MILF, Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), and private armed groups (PAGs) of traditional politicians are mostly concentrated in Maguindanao del Sur. Their concentration in this area, particularly within the SPMS Box surrounding the Ligawasan Marsh, has contributed to the deadly toll of collective violence in this part of Maguindanao.

Infighting between commanders of different armed groups has led to widespread horizontal conflicts in the municipalities under Maguindanao del Sur. Deaths due to the multi-causality of clan feuding and land conflict has seen a significant rise over the past five years since the ratification of the BOL in 2019. A case in point is the doubling of human cost due to land conflict in South Upi and Ampatuan, which is now part of Maguindanao del Sur. These two municipalities straddle the ancestral domain claim of the Teduray-Lambangian NMIP, highlighting the increasing conflict in the contested areas.



<sup>j</sup> This ranking does not include Cotabato City, which has 325,079 population according to the PSA census. Cotabato is a lone legislative district in Maguindanao.

<sup>k</sup> Most of the local chief executives in Maguindanao del Norte are allied with MILF-led UBJP, except for Datu Odin Sinsuat and Sultan Kudarat.

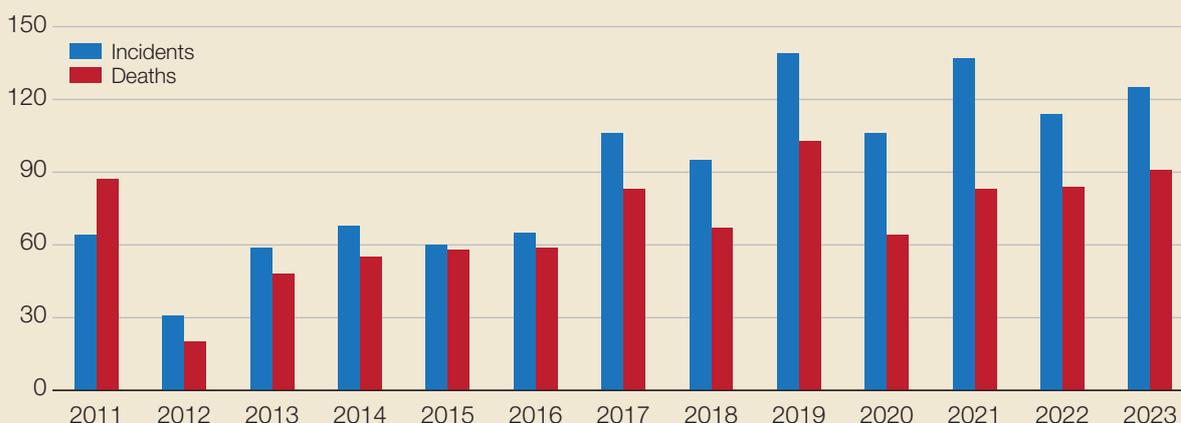
**BOX 4**

# Defining the infinite nature of Bangsamoro's clan feuds

Liezl Bugtay and Najib Zacaria

Clan feuding remained a significant driver of violence in the Bangsamoro as recorded in the Conflict Alert database from 2021 to 2023. The spikes in clan violence began in 2017 when the number of incidents graduated to three-digit figures and never returned to two-digit figures except during 2018's slight decline (**Figure E**). The last five years saw a worsening number of clan violence, particularly in 2019 with 139 incidents, and in 2021 with 137 incidents.

**Figure E: Conflict incidents and deaths due to clan feud, 2011-2023**

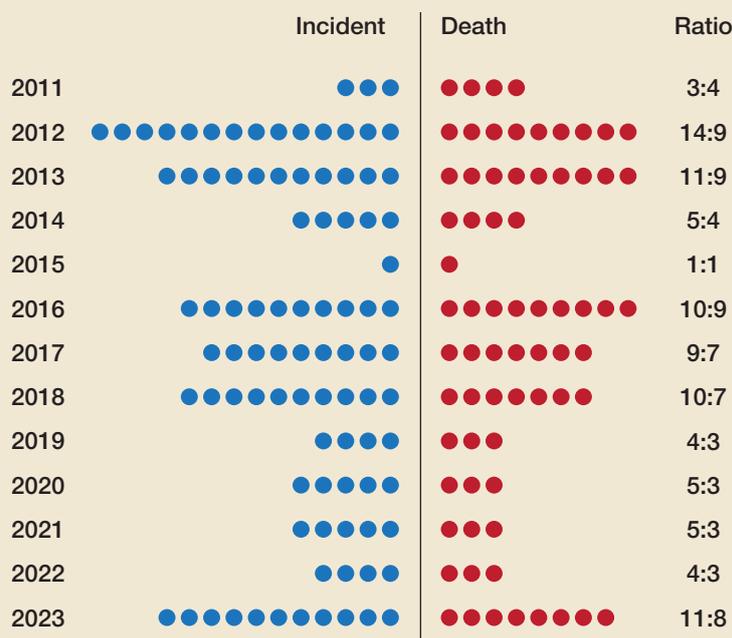


Nearly a thousand people died due to clan feuding, with 902 casualties over the thirteen years, with the year 2019 posted the highest number of deaths in parallel to its number of incidents. The restrictions during the pandemic period from 2020 to 2021 did not curb the frequency and magnitude of clan violence. **Figure F** demonstrates the deadliness of clan feuds through the years where the years 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2019, and 2022 were seen as worse in clan violence. For instance, each incident cost one life in 2015, nine deaths for every ten incidents in 2016, and four incidents resulted in three deaths in 2019.

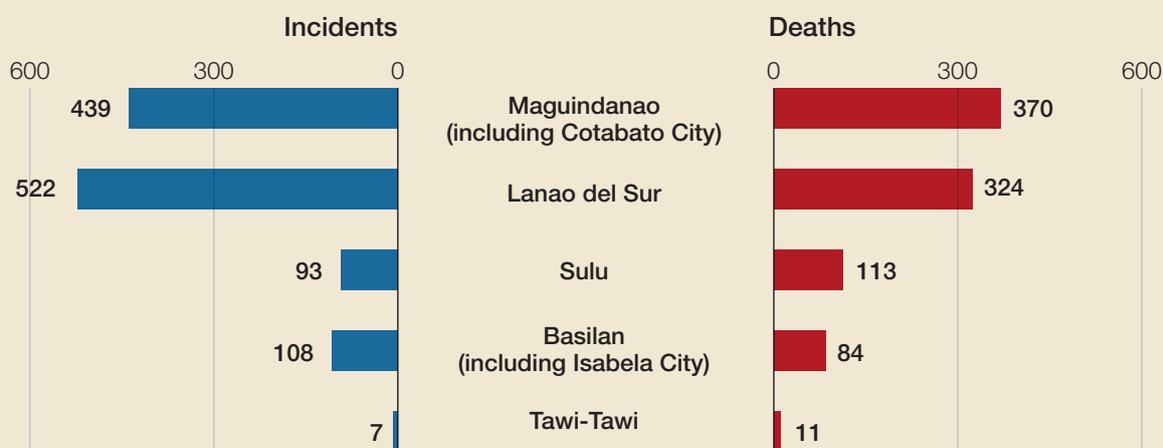
Clan feuding is mostly concentrated in the mainland provinces of Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur, where more than 80 percent of violence occurs. Forty-five percent (45%) of clan feuding occurred in Lanao del Sur while 38 percent happened in Maguindanao.

Though Lanao del Sur topped the number of incidents, the number of casualties increased in Maguindanao provinces where deaths more than doubled in 2013 and 2016. Clan feuds produced more casualties in Maguindanao, while Sulu recorded the most deaths among the island provinces, despite Basilan having the most clan feuds compared to Sulu and Tawi-tawi (**Figure G**).

**Figure F: Incident-death ratio of clan feud**



**Figure G: Incidents and deaths due to clan feud, by province, 2011-2023**



The figures above underline the continuing threat of clan feuding in Muslim Mindanao and its common characteristics:

**Affiliation with armed groups.** Affiliations with an armed group became a prominent factor in clan feuding, as numbers showed more deaths and displacement in recent years. For instance, clashes and encounters between armed groups resulted in 25 deaths and more than 2,000 displaced people in Maguindanao in 2011. In Lanao del Sur, a long-running clan feud involving families affiliated with armed groups against a political family yielded fewer deaths and displacement in the same year. The comparison showed the difference in human cost once the rival parties had members from an armed group. Being affiliated with armed groups provided strength for the clan and a higher standing in their communities, enabling clans to (1) gain access to weaponry and trainings, (2) gain familiarity of the terrain and adjacent communities, (3) improve

combat tactics; and (4) gain access to the wider networks of the group. Thus, being affiliated with an armed group meant combat readiness of the clans as the need arose.<sup>l</sup>

**Multicausality of clan feuding.** The combination of causes further worsened the impact of clan violence in the Bangsamoro region. First, clan members having access to illicit weapons would often resort to other causes of violence such as resources and identity in their communities. Conflict Alert recorded 826 cases of clan feuding and use of illicit weapons from 2011 to 2023. Second, clan feuding stemming from land disputes could stretch violence for a longer period time and gradually improve access to illicit weapons that perpetuates violence.

Shooting, ambushes, and clashes were common manifestations of clan feuding, often resulting in massive displacement affecting neighboring communities. The violence would often linger until the subsequent election season as a new set of public authorities are elected to office.

The explosive combination of identity, resource, and political causes often lead to a series of violent flashpoints. These multi-causal conflicts produce conflict strings, defined as “episodes of violence arising from a discrete incident with singular, or multiples causes” (de la Rosa 2014). It is imperative to understand the multiplicity of causes and at what point to intervene in this series of episodes and related parallel conflicts to effectively cut these strings and prevent further violence.<sup>m</sup>

**Clan as a primordial identity.** Clan adherence and loyalties are embedded in the Bangsamoro psyche. Membership in a clan is rooted in one’s life cycle—as clans often provide a sense of security, basic needs, livelihoods, and other privileges and opportunities as one matures. A clan leader, usually a local politician or an armed group leader, often serves as the source of a clan’s core strength, and often controls decision-making and strategic actions.

The replacements of clan leaders are crucial and does not necessarily follow the bloodline. Often, the transition process to the next leader may be tainted with doubt and tension especially when the old is replaced by new blood. The dynamics of a transition need to be promptly addressed to maintain the clan’s loyalty and cohesion.

The database recorded 1,169 clan feuds in the last thirteen years in the Bangsamoro region. It demonstrates the strength of clan institutions, but also the vulnerability of the young to violence, death, and displacement. Displacement figures showed thousands of people affected in the last five years, such as the 4,597 displaced persons in Maguindanao alone in 2019, or the 13,002 individuals displaced at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Both incidents involved armed groups that affected several municipalities in the SPMS Box.

Several mechanisms have been put in place to address clan feuding, including early response, polarization monitoring, and mediation. The tenacity of armed groups and their easy recourse to violence has also been reduced in recent years through joint efforts of local governments, religious leaders, and civil society groups.



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<sup>l</sup> Interview with a member of Early Response Network, 08 July 2024

<sup>m</sup> de la Rosa, Nikki Phylline. “Disrupting conflict strings in sub-national contexts: Experience from Muslim Mindanao, Philippines.” Paper presented at World Health Organization and University of Cambridge Global Conference 2014, Kings College, Cambridge, UK, 18-19 September 2014. <https://conflicalert.info/our-work/briefs/27/disrupting-conflict-strings-in-sub-national-contexts-experience-from-muslim-mindanao-philippines>. See also Chapter 4 on Untangling Conflict Strings in the publication *Conflict’s Long Game*, 2023.



A major road leading into Tubaran, Lanao del Sur was heavily secured during a special election on May 24, 2022. This security measure came two days after the town was declared a failure in the scheduled national elections due to intense political rivalry.

📍 **Ferdinandh Cabrera**

## Political battles and rising profits stir shadow economy-related violence

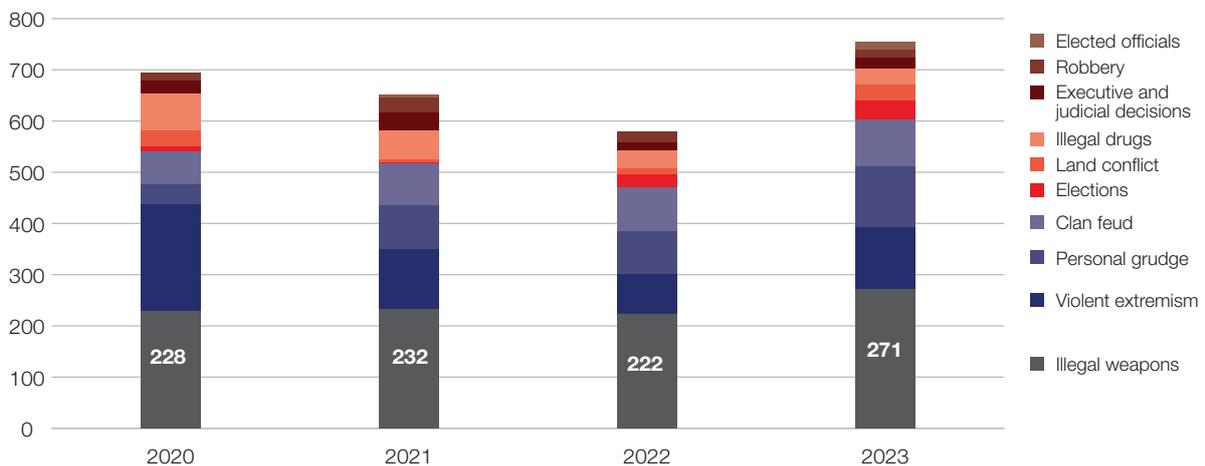
Shadow economies in guns and drugs preserved their significant presence in the BARMM, despite decommissioning and normalization, and the so-called war on drugs by the Duterte government.

The onset of major political-electoral battles in the past three years fuelled the upsurge in illicit guns and weapons. New weapons flooded the black market as various armed groups resupplied their armories in preparation for plebiscites and elections. The illicit guns market claimed the most conflict deaths in the Bangsamoro region despite having fewer incidents than illegal drugs (Figures 17-18).

Meanwhile, a doubling in illicit-drug related incidents in the past three years came from a more robust and vibrant illicit drugs market. The illegal drugs sector was never as deadly in the BARMM in comparison to the rest of the country even during the Duterte government, which made it easier to expand. Investments and profits in the illicit manufacture and trade of various drugs and narcotics has turned drug money and profits into the chief currency for securing robust economic resources and vast political power.



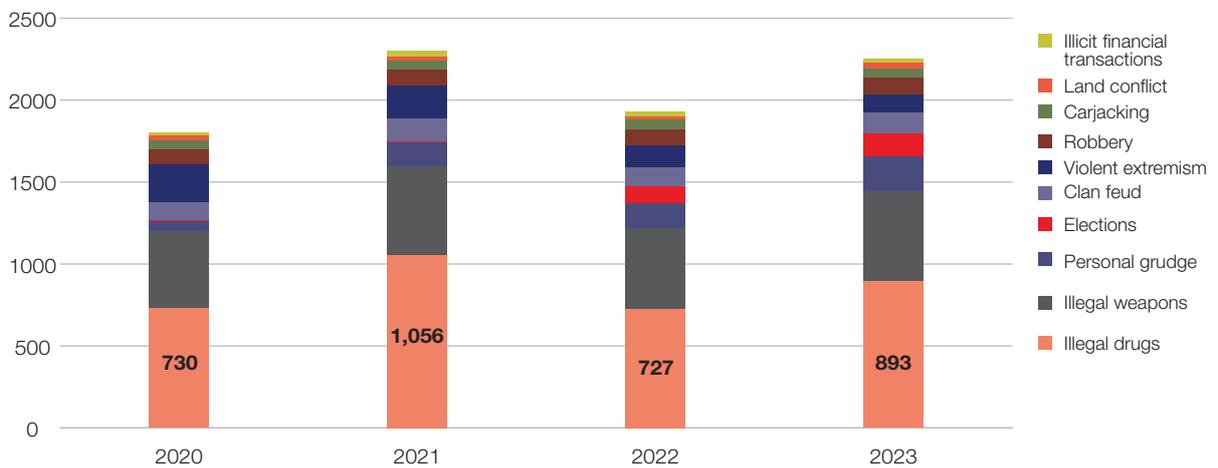
**Figure 17: Top ten specific causes of conflict deaths, 2020-2023**





A voter is killed on the way to cast their vote in the barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan elections in Brgy. Bugawas, Datu Odin Sinsuat—an area marked as an election hotspot due to intense political rivalries. October 2023. [@ Ferdinandh Cabrera](#)

**Figure 18: Top ten specific causes of conflict incidents, 2020-2023**



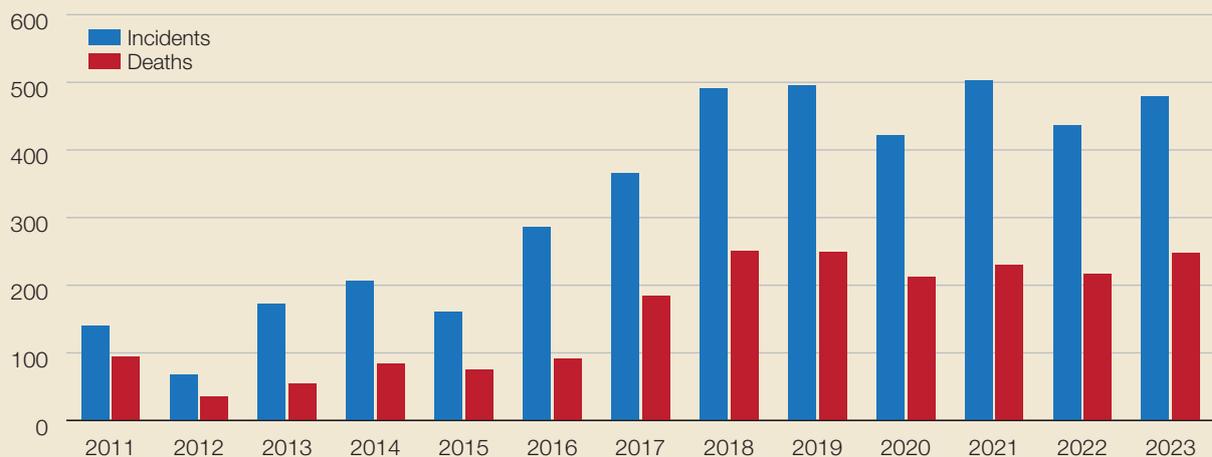
**BOX 5**

# Gun violence surges

**Eddie Qutoriano**

Gun-related violence surged in the Bangsamoro in the 2021 to 2023 period, reversing the downtrend in violent incidents notched in 2020.

Incidents climbed in 2021 from 2020, slipped in the following year, but then rose again by 2023 (**Figure H**). Violence reared amid shooting incidents, and in the wake of continued fighting between government troops and extremist groups, feuding between clans, clashes between factions of the MILF and other armed groups, a sustained crackdown on illegal drugs and other pernicious shadow economy activities, and elections, particularly for barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan officials in 2023.

**Figure H: Violent incidents and deaths due to illegal guns, 2011-2023**

Deaths from gun-related violence followed the trend in incidents, rising in 2021 and 2023.

Civilians comprised the highest number of actors involved in gun-related incidents, whether as suspected perpetrators or as victims. The easy access to firearms has allowed them to turn 'personal grudges' into violent, often fatal, shooting incidents. The data show that such incidents, defined by misunderstanding, disagreement or quarrels between individuals, had steadily increased in the 2021 to 2023 period, as did the deaths attributed to them.

Of the five provinces comprising the Bangsamoro region, Maguindanao saw the highest number of shooting incidents. Now comprised by Maguindanao del Norte and Maguindanao del Sur plus the city of Cotabato, Maguindanao grappled with shooting incidents in both rural and urban areas, often perpetrated by motorcycle-riding assassination teams. Meanwhile, in the rural areas, the government continued to pursue the BIFF and other armed groups, while factions of the MILF, MNLF and BIFF fought over land, adding to the disruption caused by clan feuding over this and

other resources.<sup>n</sup> Communities of the non-Moro Teduray-Lambangian indigenous people remain displaced by the violence that is targeted at them or affecting them.

Gun-related violence has serious implications on the peace and security situation of the region as it concludes its transition in 2024 and holds its first parliamentary election in 2025, or at the same time as elections for city and municipal government officials, which is held every three years. Already, shooting incidents have claimed fatalities among individuals identified with parties planning to take part in the 2025 polls.

The problem of loose firearms will be difficult to resolve. In the Bangsamoro, the presence of armed groups, private armies, and a culture that encourages retribution has made gun ownership necessary to provide a sense of security. Thus, a program to decommission the firearms of the BIAF, the MILF's military arm, has been met with reluctance even if weapons they personally own are excluded from the program. The September 2023 report of the Independent Decommissioning Body, which oversees the decommissioning process, has indicated just a 65 percent accomplishment comprising 26,132 BIAF combatants, 4,625 weapons, and 6,317 ammunitions.

With weapons remaining in their hands, fighting among MILF factions has been unceasing, raising questions about the MILF leadership's ability to rein in their combatants despite them being at the helm of the Bangsamoro transition process. The future looks grim with such violence intersecting with conflicts between and among other groups and individuals.

In the national arena, the proliferation of illegal firearms has been an intractable problem. As of 2017, an estimated 3.77 million guns were in civilian hands, of which 2.04 million (54%) were un-registered (Small Arms Survey, 2018). From 2015 to 2023, the PNP took control of 165,936 firearms that were either confiscated, seized, recovered, and surrendered (PNP annual accomplishment reports, 2015-2023). These comprised a mere 8.2 percent of the estimated 2.04 million loose firearms.

The gravest mistake of the central state, the Bangsamoro transition government, and the MILF would be to condone the armed violence. At the very least, gun control should deter gun violence. The gun law, Republic Act 10591 or the Comprehensive Firearms and Ammunition Regulation Act, is a national law that should be implemented nationwide and not diminished even under a peace transition regime. At the first instance, the MILF and the PNP-Firearms and Explosives Office should be able to inventory and call for the registration of all illegal guns in the region. These include illegal guns personally owned by MILF combatants and excluded from the decommissioning program.



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<sup>n</sup> See Box 2: Deadly wait for a Bangsamoro Land Law.

Traditional shadow economies such as gambling, carjacking, and illicit financial transactions surfaced in reports from 2021 to 2023, including illicit cross-border trade in the past two years as the trade in smuggled cigarettes and protected wildlife increased.

## Persistent extremist violence

Violent extremism remains a deadly cause of conflict in the Bangsamoro despite its continuous decline after the Marawi siege in 2017. The number of incidents decreased by 46 percent decrease from 199 incidents in 2021 to 108 in 2023 (**Figure 19**).

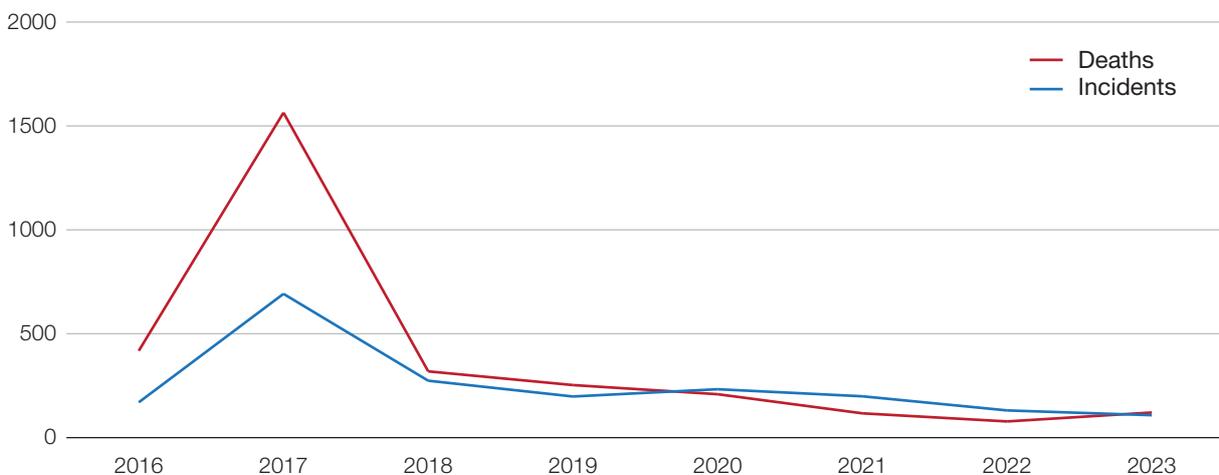
However, while the ratio of incidents to deaths in 2021 and 2022 were lower at 59 percent and 60 percent respectively, the number of deaths overtook the number of incidents in 2023. Indeed, extremist violence has become the second deadliest specific cause of conflict after illegal weapons, with only a fourth of the incidents recorded from 2021 to 2023. Clashes, ambushes, and bombings exacted the highest human cost—affecting civilians, communities, and the security forces across the provinces in the Bangsamoro.

However, numbers would vary when looking at the provinces (**Figure 20**). Maguindanao including Cotabato City had the highest number of both incidents and deaths across the five provinces in 2023 with 48 incidents and 65 killed, respectively. The number of incidents and deaths were highest in 2021 (107 incidents and 77 deaths) before declining in 2022 and surging again in 2023. In Lanao del Sur, however, the numbers continued to rise at the tail-end of the COVID-19 pandemic. The numbers would surge in 2022 with 25 incidents and 27 deaths but sustained these figures in the following year.

Basilan, including Isabela City also maintained its numbers in incidents and deaths throughout 2021 to 2023. There were 22 incidents both in 2021 and 2022 before slightly declining in 2023 with 20 incidents. These numbers show a significant decline beginning in 2019. One could say that safety and protection from extremist violence has been achieved in Basilan.<sup>8</sup>

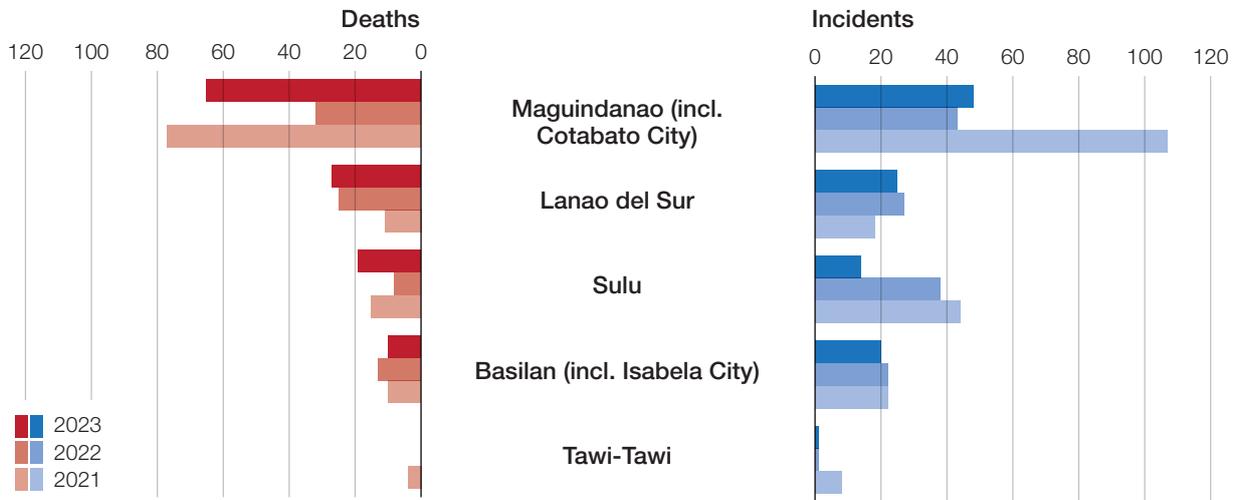
The province of Sulu would enjoy the same disintegration of extremist violence. The number of incidents in the province continued to dive during the three-year period (**Figure 21**). In fact, the collapse of violent extremism in the province was first seen when the Conflict Alert database started recording a massive drop even before the Marawi siege. The combined number of deaths

**Figure 19: Violent extremism incidents and deaths in the Bangsamoro, 2016-2023**

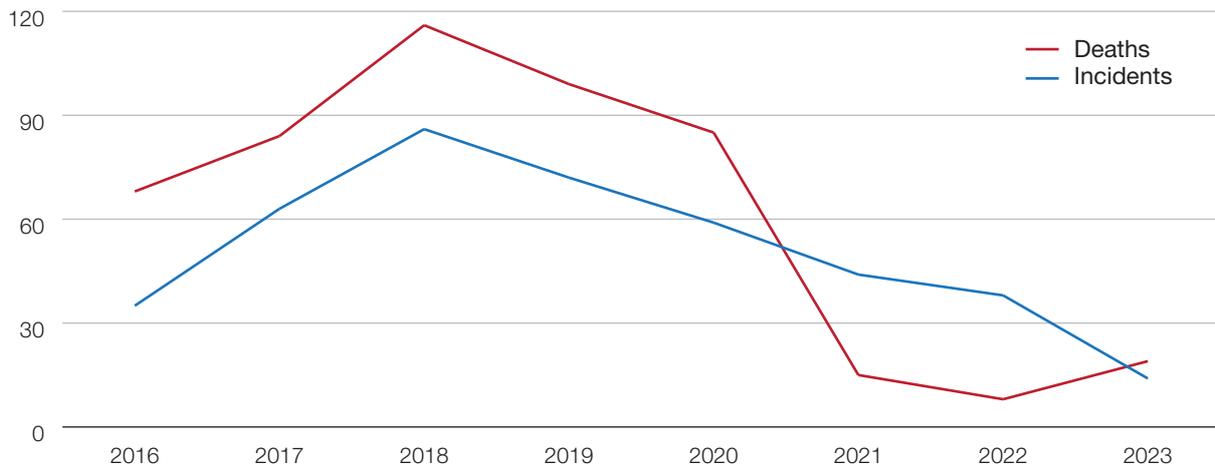


<sup>8</sup> In 2020, the Conflict Alert “Enduring Wars” reported that peace had dawned in Basilan due to the declining incidents of conflict in the province. A majority of these are violent extremism involving the Abu Sayyaf Group.

**Figure 20: Violent extremism incidents and deaths in the Bangsamoro, by province, 2021-2023**



**Figure 21: Violent extremism incidents and deaths in Sulu, 2016-2023**



**“The province of Sulu would enjoy the same disintegration of extremist violence. The number of incidents in the province continued to dive during the three-year period.”**

from 2021 to 2023 is even lower compared to the annual numbers from 2016 to 2020. In September 2023, the military declared Sulu as free from the presence of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)—marking a significant achievement for peace and development in the province.

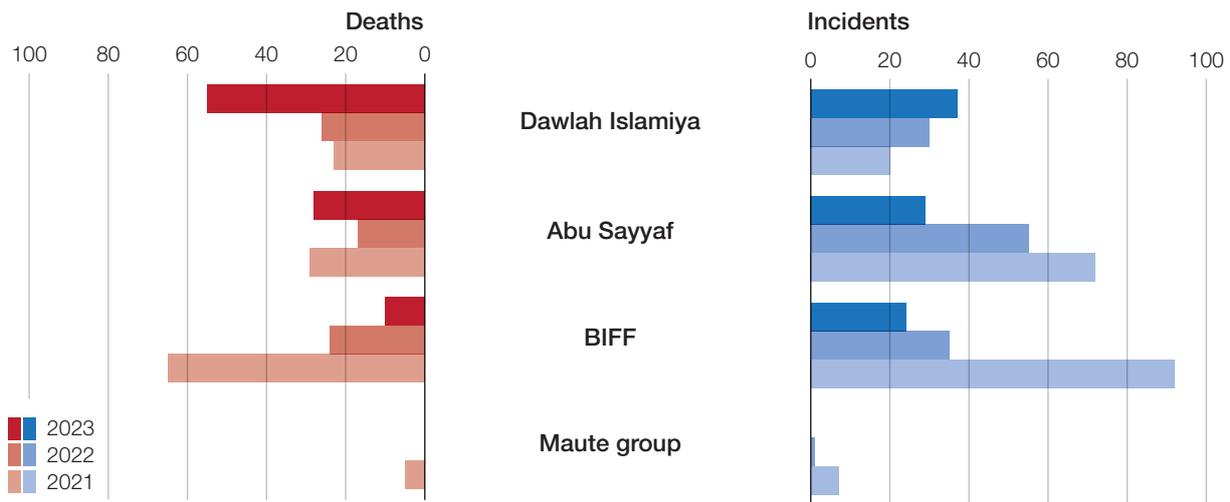
### Dawlah Islamiya now the lead actor in VE

In terms of actors, the Dawlah Islamiya (DI) had become the principal actor in violent extremism across the Bangsamoro provinces. In 2023, most of the incidents and deaths due to VE involved DI (**Figure 22**). They took the lead from other extremist groups in 2023, sidestepping the ASG

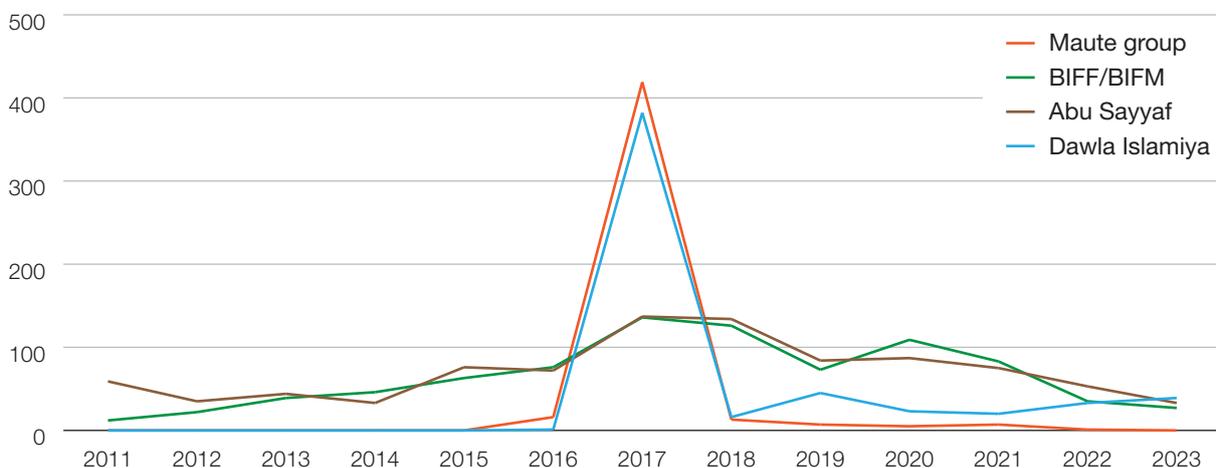
in the island provinces, the BIFF in Maguindanao and the Maute Group in Lanao del Sur. The number of deaths involving DI increased two-fold from 26 in 2022 to 55 in 2023.

The Dawlah Islamiya first gained prominence during the 2017 Marawi siege and were connected to violent extremist incidents involving the Maute Group in Lanao del Sur. When the military launched its relentless operations to eliminate the Maute Group in Lanao, incidents involving the DI would surge. They spread across the Maguindanao provinces in 2019, and they had become a mainstay in the province from 2021 to 2023. In Sulu, the DI are also slowly starting to establish themselves with a surge in their involvement from only one incident in

**Figure 22: Violent extremism deaths and incidents by actors, 2021-2023**



**Figure 23: Incidents involving violent extremist actors, 2011-2023**



2021 to eight in 2022 and 2023. While incidents involving the ASG, BIFF, and Maute Group had continuously declined from 2021 to 2023, it was the opposite for the DI as incidents with their involvement increased during the same period (**Figure 23**).

Conflict Alert data from 2021 and 2023 also revealed the growing links of violent extremism to the illegal drug trade. There was a total of 16 incidents of drug buy-busts conducted during this period, mostly in Sulu and Lanao del Sur with those arrested having links to DI. In Maguindanao, two incidents involving the BIFF were also found to be related to illegal drugs.

### **Mainland concentration of violent extremism**

Identity-related conflict in the form of extremist violence has seen significant declines—key leaders of the ASG and DI were successfully neutralized, and previous hotspots such as Sulu and Basilan reported less incidents and costs. However, the decline has been accompanied by critical changes in the concentration and magnitude of extremist violence.

**First**, incidents of VE are now focused in the mainland provinces of Lanao del Sur and both Maguindanao del Sur and del Norte, rather than the island provinces of Sulu and Basilan. They have continued to survive in the mainland, directly within the reach of the national and subnational state.

**Second**, conflict deaths have risen above the number of incidents. For years, the number of conflict incidents have always surpassed the number of deaths, except in 2017 during the war in Marawi, indicating that cases of extremist violence included clashes where both parties did not always lead to deaths. In contrast, most incidents today, whether in the form of arrests, clashes, or ambushes, produce fatalities. The number of VE-related deaths spiked in Maguindanao, with Lanao del Sur and Sulu exhibiting similar increases. Few violent extremists are being arrested.

**Finally**, there are numerous reports of extremist violence being preceded by reports of VE recruitment in hotspots such as Butig,

Marogong, and Piagapo in Lanao del Sur, and Munai in Lanao del Norte. Recruitment is also accompanied by the growing concern over the expected hiring out by VE groups of their services to political actors to consolidate resources and networks, as they did prior to every election from 2015 and 2016 in Lanao del Sur.

### **A glimpse of hope on violent extremism**

One should recognize that the declining incidents of violent extremism in the Bangsamoro is a significant achievement for the security sector and communities that had long suffered from the violence wreaked by extremist armed groups. The efforts of both the security sector and local government units in Basilan and Sulu in the last three years are indicative of the greater confidence and resolve of the military to thwart the violence caused by VE groups.

There is need for caution though when it comes to eventually ending extremist violence in the Bangsamoro without ensuring that the scourge does not reappear elsewhere. In mainland Bangsamoro, early reports in 2024 signify that VE had spilled over to areas outside the BARMM, particularly in Munai, Lanao del Norte, causing massive displacement among its communities. There are reports too of continued recruitment of violent extremists among the young people in the same hotspot areas in 2017. Data from Conflict Alert shows evidence of VE groups hiring their services to local politicians during election season. With the upcoming first parliamentary elections in the BARMM, the enduring threat of VE in the region and adjacent areas remains real and current.

**“One should recognize that the declining incidents of violent extremism in the Bangsamoro is a significant achievement for the security sector and communities.”**

# Temporal nature of conflict

**The Conflict Alert report** identifies critical periods when violent conflict often erupts and intensifies, demonstrating the changing terrain of temporal violence that is increasingly tied to recent and forthcoming political battles and democratic contestation (**Figure 24**).

Recent events cannot be disentangled from the traditional violence during the lean agricultural months from July to September—because village elections overlapped. The number of incidents would thus increase during the lean months of July to September before the main harvest season. In 2021, the numbers remained steady in July to August before increasing in September. A continuous increase was seen in 2022 with 189 incidents in July and peaked in September with 234 incidents. A contrasting movement, however, was seen in 2023 with the number decreasing

from July to September, before surging in October during the village polls.

The number of incidents in 2022 was highest in May during the national elections and in October in 2023 during the barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan with 242 and 273 incidents, respectively.

The Ramadan period, which often fell within the periods of mid-March to mid-May fluctuated in the three-year period. The highest was in 2022 as it coincided in the run-up to the national elections on 9 May 2022. In 2021, the numbers during this period fell from 227 incidents in April to 191 in May. In 2023, however, the numbers were high with 215 incidents in March before declining to 197 in April.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 24: Conflict incidents by month, 2021-2023**



<sup>9</sup> The Ramadan periods were observed from April 12 to May 12 in 2021, April 1 to May 1 in 2022, and March 22 to April 20 in 2023.

## Bloodiest elections in the Bangsamoro region

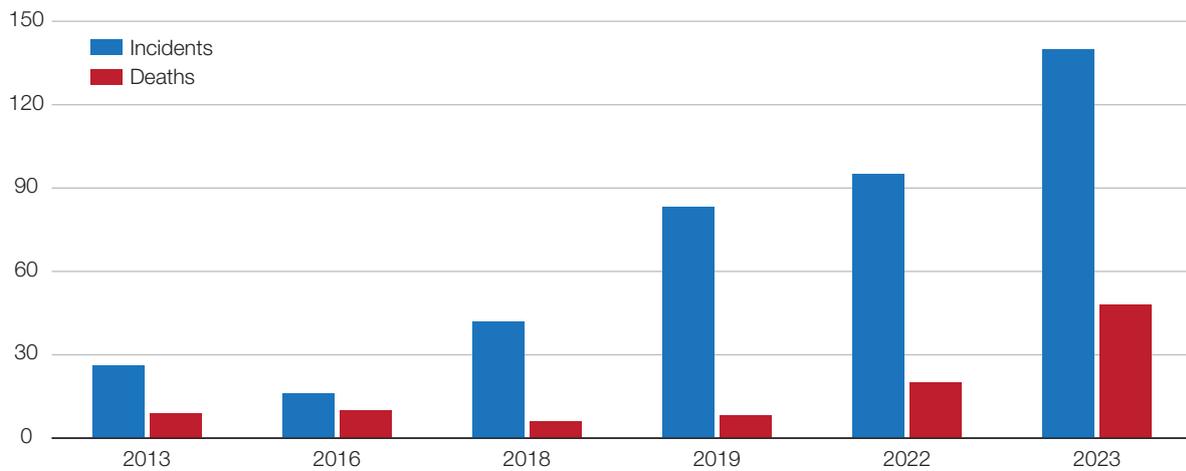
Thirteen years of monitoring conflict in the Bangsamoro region often saw violence spike during election years. The year 2022 witnessed a national election that saw the rise of a new administration in the country. People also voted in the local positions, which enabled a change in leadership in some cities and municipalities, but more of the same in others. In 2023, the Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan (BSK) election was held after a reprieve of five years since the last village polls in 2018. As in previous years, election-related violence exploded during these two election years.

Election-related violence began to rise in 2018 and has not receded since then (Figure 25).

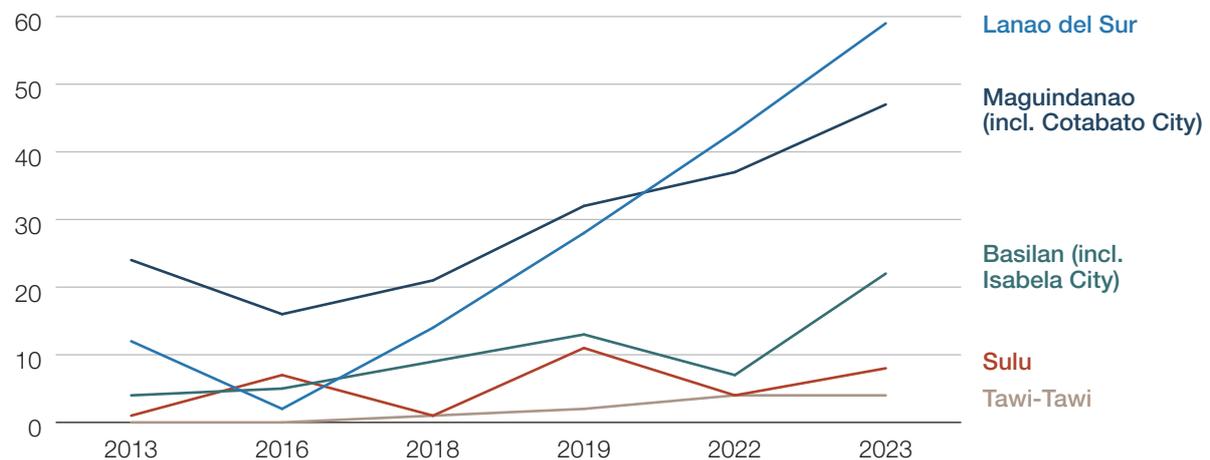
In fact, the years 2022 and 2023 marked the bloodiest elections in what should have been a democratic transition to peace in the Bangsamoro region. A total of 68 deaths were recorded in the two-year period, which is much higher as compared to the 33 combined number of deaths during the election years of 2013, 2016, 2018 and 2019.

The numbers would vary across provinces. The provinces of Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao including Cotabato City witnessed a continuous increase in election-related violence beginning in 2018 and peaked in 2023, with 59 and 47 incidents, respectively. While other provinces had fluctuating numbers, Lanao del Sur exhibits a constant steep climb in its political violence beginning 2016. (Figure 26).

**Figure 25: Election-related violence and deaths in the Bangsamoro, election years**



**Figure 26: Election-related violence, by province, election years**



Sulu and Basilan, including Isabela City, experienced a decline in incidents during the 2022 national elections before resurging in 2023, with the former having a two-fold increase during the village polls. Tawi-Tawi, on the other hand, retained its number of election-related incidents in 2022 and 2023.

When it comes to the number of deaths however, Maguindanao including Cotabato City was the bloodiest, overtaking Lanao del Sur in 2023. Law enforcement groups recorded 21 deaths in 2023, followed closely by Lanao del Sur with 18 deaths in the same year (**Figure 27**). Basilan including Isabela City likewise experienced a bloody election with no deaths in 2022 to eight deaths in 2023. Tawi-Tawi had one death, while Sulu was the most peaceful with no deaths recorded both in 2022 and 2023.

The election years of 2022 and 2023 were the first democratic exercises held in the region after the ratification of the BOL in 2019. In 2022, the first parliamentary election was supposed to be held until it was postponed to 2025 after the transition was extended until 2025. The MILF formed a political party, the UBJP, to test their electoral and political skills by joining and fielding in candidates for local positions, particularly in Maguindanao.

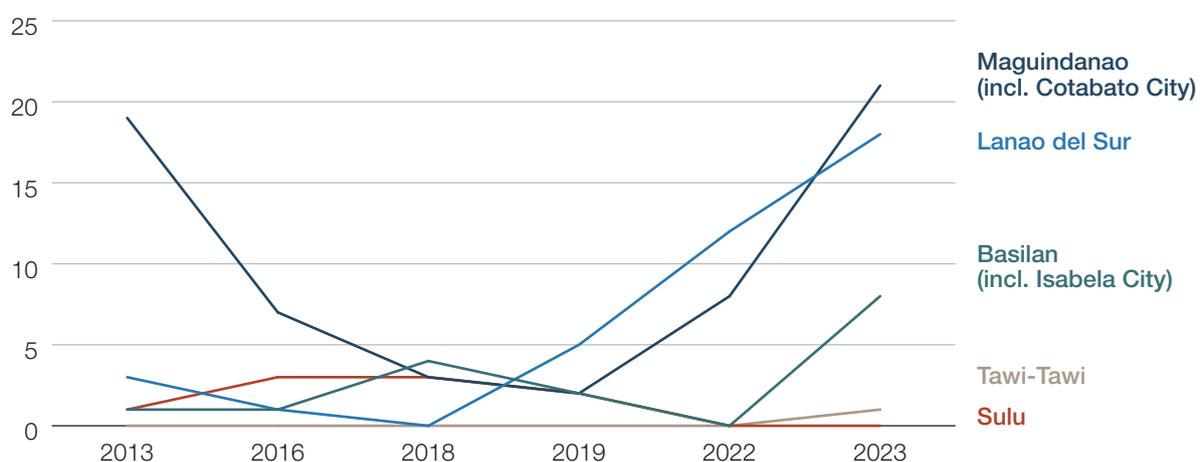
Indeed, Cotabato City placed second with the highest number of election-related incidents in 2022. This was due to the political contestation

between its former mayor, who strongly opposed the city's inclusion in the BARMM during the 2019 plebiscite, and a UBJP candidate. The UBJP-backed candidate subsequently won the local chief executive position in 2022. However, this still did not bode well for the city as it had the highest number of deaths during the 2023 elections.

Meanwhile, Datu Odin Sinsuat had the highest number of incidents during the 2023 BSK elections due to political contestation between its incumbent mayor who is also against the current Bangsamoro administration. The results of the 2022 elections revealed that the UBJP had captured most of the municipalities in Maguindanao del Norte. Meanwhile, an MILF leader was appointed to the governorship of the province. Datu Odin Sinsuat and Sultan Kudarat remain as the two municipalities in Maguindanao del Norte who have not given their support to the Bangsamoro government.

Lanao del Sur was the most violent in the 2022 midterm elections as the Commission on Elections (Comelec) declared a failure of elections in three municipalities of Tubaran, Binidayan, and Butig due to threats, intimidation, and violence. Maguing and Malabang towns in Lanao del Sur were subjected to numerous armed clashes between warring clans in the elections of 2022 and 2023. Violent political contestation was due to two prominent and opposing clans who were vying for the mayoral positions.

**Figure 27: Election-related deaths, by province, election years**



The elections were generally peaceful in the island provinces, except for a few recorded deaths in Basilan. Lamitan City and Tipo-Tipo in Basilan.

The violence in the mainland during the past two election years may be a prelude to the 2025 elections. The violent political competition

between and among families may also reignite longstanding feuds and contribute to the anticipated deadly nature of the regional and midterm elections. This will also be fueled by the challenge of former rebel groups against traditional politicians who aims to strengthen their political legitimacy in the region.



Soldiers secure teachers carrying the ballots on their way to their assigned precincts before start of the barangay elections on October 30, 2022 in Saguwaran, Lanao del Sur. **■ Bobby Timonera**

**“The violence in the mainland during the past two election years may be a prelude to the 2025 elections.”**

**BOX 6**

# The voicelessness of vulnerability

**Kloe Carvajal-Yap, Nikki Philline de la Rosa, and Nicole Angelie Policarpio**

The 2015 Census of Population of the Philippines indicates that women comprised more than half of the population in the Bangsamoro region across age, marital status, religious affiliations, and household population.<sup>o</sup> The dominant number of women translates into a bigger number of economically disadvantaged women—consistent with the findings of the study conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority that more women in the Bangsamoro are considered poor than men (PSA BARMM 2020).

Gender poverty impacts the family, as well as gender-based inequality. Women take on major roles in certain sectors without the commensurate and equivalent income streams that men receive. Women also invest in education more than men and are often employed in the public sector, but their education and positions in government translate into few powers beyond the household.

This large number of women also translates into a higher probability of being victimized by violence and crime. Conflict Alert data showed increased violence against women in the Bangsamoro from 2013 to 2016, and fluctuated from thereon. In addition, more women are involved in violent conflicts such as clan feuding, land conflicts, and political violence, including violent extremism. Analyses on conflict, however, underscore how reporting gender-related incidents is often hindered by stigma, concerns about family or clan reputation, the absence of supportive reporting systems, and biased traditional settlement practices. These factors continue to obscure the true extent of violence against women and children (VAWC).

In the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, MSVG members composed of local experts and community members in BARMM, reported three incidents of rape involving young girls and three incidents of VAWC cases involving women. They also reported the use of children by drug syndicates as drug mules because they were least likely to be suspected by authorities.

Despite the passage of RA 11596, a law prohibiting child marriage in the Philippines, MSVG reports reiterated how the practice remains prevalent, particularly in remote areas. Fathers who were burdened by debt sometimes resorted to offering their young daughters as brides to older men to whom they owed money. However, such cases are not reported and recorded by authorities.

In 2022, International Alert conducted a cross-country research inquiring into the boundaries of patriarchal gender norms. The conduct of the survey serves as an entry point to delve deeper into the issues of gender, gender dynamics and conflict in the Bangsamoro,

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<sup>o</sup> Bangsamoro, officially the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) is an autonomous region located in the southern Philippines. Replacing the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), the BARMM was formed with the ratification of its basic law, the Bangsamoro Organic Law following a two-part legally binding plebiscite. The establishment of Bangsamoro was the culmination of several years of peace talks between the Philippine government and several autonomist groups; in particular the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which rejected the validity of the ARMM and called for the creation of a region with more powers devolved from the national government. The BARMM is comprised of the provinces of Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur and 63 villages in Cotabato province (Mindanao island) and the provinces of Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Basilan (except Isabela City) in the Sulu Archipelago.

particularly key gender-based issues and threats faced by women. Results of these highlight the following key points:

- 1. Economic and social roles:** Women's economic issues and caregiving roles, which are central to their lives, influence their focus on family and economic concerns. Majority of women surveyed (90%) view motherhood as their primary role. They spend significant time on household duties and informal income activities, with limited time on personal leisure, reflecting internalized caregiving roles.
- 2. Family, honor, and religion:** Family, honor, and religion significantly shape women's lives. Women have limited agency outside domestic matters and prioritize family honor (93%). They follow male relatives' commands and adhere to patriarchal norms. Despite patriarchal constraints, clans provide safe spaces and some agency in domestic roles.
- 3. Impact of the pandemic:** The pandemic worsened pre-existing economic issues. Many women have low education levels and engage in informal work. Economic hardship, combined with increased caregiving responsibilities due to the pandemic, has negatively impacted their socio-economic outlook.
- 4. Conflict and violence:** Women are more concerned about domestic and clan conflicts than about rebellion or violent extremism. They fear security threats like kidnapping and abuse. The lack of detailed responses to sensitive issues highlights the need for safe spaces to address these concerns.
- 5. Patriarchal views and agency:** Women hold some patriarchal views but reject violence as a solution. They support interfaith relationships and oppose religious violence. Although sensitive to domestic violence, they may seek safety outside abusive situations. Further research is needed on their coping strategies and experiences with violence.

Findings from the research reinforce the hypotheses that point to the vulnerability of women who suffer disproportionately in times of war, crises, and emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the study also highlights how women retain a certain degree of agency despite patriarchal gender norms that inhibit their ability to exercise their agency fully.

These findings are particularly relevant to peacebuilding outcomes, especially in strengthening the participation and role of women in preventing violent conflict and addressing issues that trigger violence in local communities. It also reinforces the importance of addressing gender-specific needs, particularly the need to broaden women's socio-economic and political participation, especially in conflict contexts where the vulnerabilities of women are exacerbated, spaces are limited for the discussion of gendered issues, existing structures do not necessarily promote the development of approaches and interventions that are relevant and appropriate, and when there are efforts to do so, the process often lacks women's meaningful participation.

Passing laws like the anti-VAWC act or the anti-child marriage law without accompanying socio-economic and cultural changes could further result in unintended consequences such as driving issues underground and away from public scrutiny. Real improvements in the economic and social status of women and children require more than legislation. To truly address gender-based violence and patriarchal norms, policies must be paired with ground-level efforts to shift cultural attitudes, expand spaces where women can exercise their agency, and strengthen their voice in ways that are meaningful and impact their everyday lives.





Members of the Teduray-Lambangian indigenous group flee armed clashes due to political feuding in Brgy. Lamud, South Upi in June 2023, several months before the village polls. NMIPs are constantly displaced because of the interplay of identity, resource, and political issues. ■ Edward Abelardo

**BOX 7**

# Recalculating the intensity of violence

**Donnie-Paul Tan and Kenmore Espinoza**

Reviewing and developing a more effective means of measuring violence is needed after more than a decade of using the Alert violence intensity index (VII). The current index examines two major components to describe the scale of violence: magnitude and frequency. Magnitude refers to the human cost of violent conflicts while frequency refers to the tally of incidents in each place and time-period.

Both summarizes these dimensions as mere aggregates and totals in terms of reference period and location. While this approach can describe intensity, this does not take advantage of the dataset's breadth and granularity. Taking account and making use of the latter is done in this short study and review.

The main approach is to exploit the information of each incident and develop alternative indicators to describe the dimensions of frequency and magnitude. To get as much information, incidents are not assumed as independent of each other and may be contingent on past events.

We see this as an initial attempt to dive deeper into the thirteen-year-old dataset, and to provide new insights with a new arsenal of indicators. The new indicators should be able to better inform policymakers and stakeholders the scale and severity of each conflict incident. This information can also help identify priorities for action in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts in the region. These indicators can then be interpreted independently to analyse a particular dimension, or they can be integrated to formulate a composite index of violence intensity.

## Magnitude

Magnitude is defined as the human cost of conflict-related events. The most common means to describe magnitude is the incident's death toll. In the context of this dataset, other forms of conflict casualty types are included. Specifically, this refers to the number of persons killed, wounded, and other types of human casualties. To summarize this information, the following indicators are used:

- Total number of deaths in the incident
- Total number of injured in the incident
- Total number of missing, trafficked, taken hostage, or kidnapped in the incident

The latter bullet can be interpreted as the number of cases of forced disappearance from conflict.

A particular interest is limiting the effects of conflict on civilians and children<sup>P</sup> as states must stress its responsibility on civilian protection in armed conflicts (United Nations 2019). The total number of

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<sup>P</sup> In counting the number of civilians and children, these are excluded if they are involved as suspected perpetrators and enforcers. Throughout this article, the authors may also refer the same as 'civilians' for brevity.

conflict deaths worldwide disproportionately constitutes civilians (Hoeffler and Reynal-Querol 2003). A rise in civil casualties can also signify conflict escalation and expansion of violence to other areas. In this regard, we include the following civilian casualty indicators:

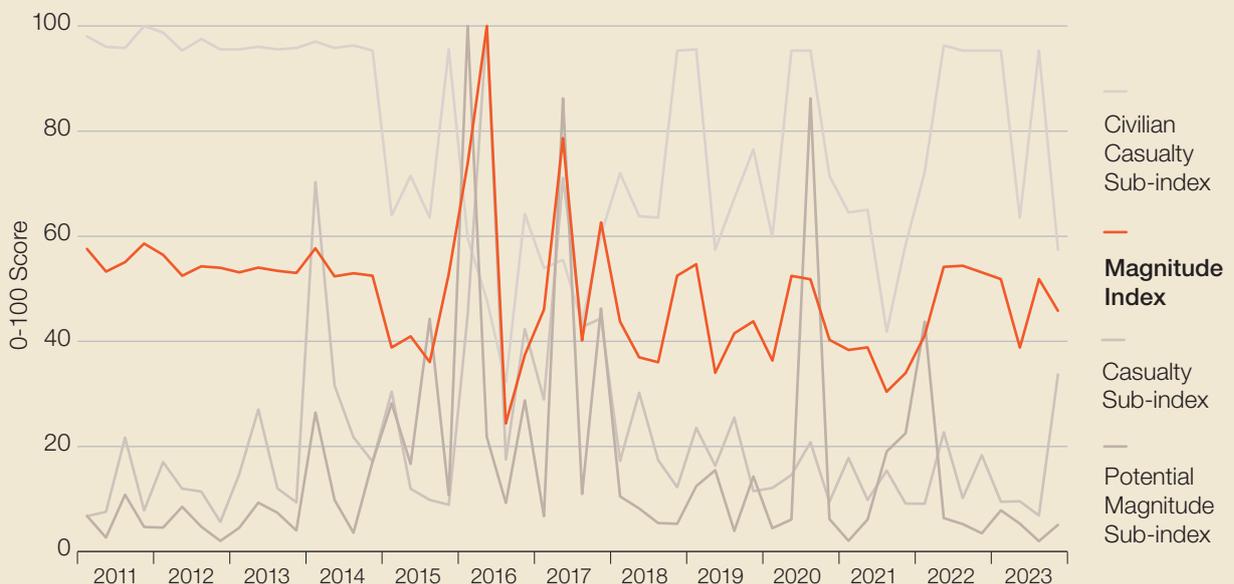
- Proportion of civilians and children over the total number who died in the incident
- Proportion of injured civilians and children over the total number of injured in the incident
- Proportion of missing, trafficked, taken hostage, or kidnapped civilians and children over its total number in the incident

In doing so, these constitutes all negative consequences directly associated with conflict. Focusing only on the consequences, however, may limit measurement of intensity of the conflict (Trinn and Wencker 2018). Including the means of conflict, defined by number of weapons and personnel involved, marks the potential number of casualties in a given incident and can explain the dimension of magnitude. As such, means of conflict included in the magnitude index are:

- Number of people involved in the incident (includes bystanders, complainants, and relatives)
- Number of guns as reported in the incident
- Number of explosives as reported in the incident.

**Figure I** below shows the resulting magnitude index and its dimensions. Interestingly, the main driver of the magnitude index is civilian casualty. As well, the index shows that incidents recorded pre-Marawi siege are more intense in terms of casualties, i.e., more civilian casualties, relative to those that occurred post-Marawi siege. We note also that the dip in 2017 is reflective of the failure of the current dataset to account for accurate information on displacement, otherwise we would be able to see a rise in the index in this period.

**Figure I: Magnitude Index and its dimensions, quarterly data**



## Frequency

Frequency, as previously defined in the index, is the number of incidents. Although counting incidents is a common operation to obtain frequency by setting a reference period, the approach here departs from convention by emphasizing the incidents are related with others. Assuming that some violent incidents are not done in isolation, and the sequence of these incidents matter, this

dimension should introduce an element of time and duration, underscoring each incident’s historical information. Violence frequency, therefore, can be interpreted as how common similar events have occurred before. From this concept of similarity, this exercise postulates that intensity can be explained through four attributes. **First**, the location of past similar incidents can happen nearby to each other. **Second**, previous incidents of the same cause motivate similar incidents. **Third**, the occurrence of similar incidents is done by the same non-state organized actor groups. Lastly, similar incidents would manifest themselves in the same fashion, likened to a modus operandi.

- Number of incidents occurring within a 15-kilometer radius for the past number of days since the incident. (Proximity)
- Number of incidents of the same specific cause for the past number of days since the incident. (Motivation)
- Number of incidents for the past number of days since the incident where at least one actor group (except for state actors, civilians and children) is also involved. (Actor)
- Number of incidents with the same manifestation as with incidents happening in the past number of days. (Manifestation)

In this context, the time window is arbitrarily set at 60 days, 14 days, and three days to distinguish medium-term, short-term and immediate-term violent frequencies respectively. These indicators somewhat follow the methodology of Rubin and Ihle (2017) in introducing temporality in describing conflicts. This new approach of measuring frequency also has the advantage of determining trends and detecting conflict escalation and de-escalation phases among possible related events.

**Figure J** provides the resulting frequency index. It is revealed that all dimensions follow the same trend as in the intensity index.

As observed, prior to the Marawi Siege in 2017, conflict incidents are less frequent (in terms of proximity, motivations, actors involved, and manifestations). It is noted however, that a rising trend is observed until it reaches its peak in the later months of 2016. Post-Marawi Siege index, however, pose a great concern since it has not reverted to its pre-2017 levels indicating that conflict incidents are more frequent in BARMM now compared to before.

**Figure J: Frequency Index and its dimensions, quarterly data**



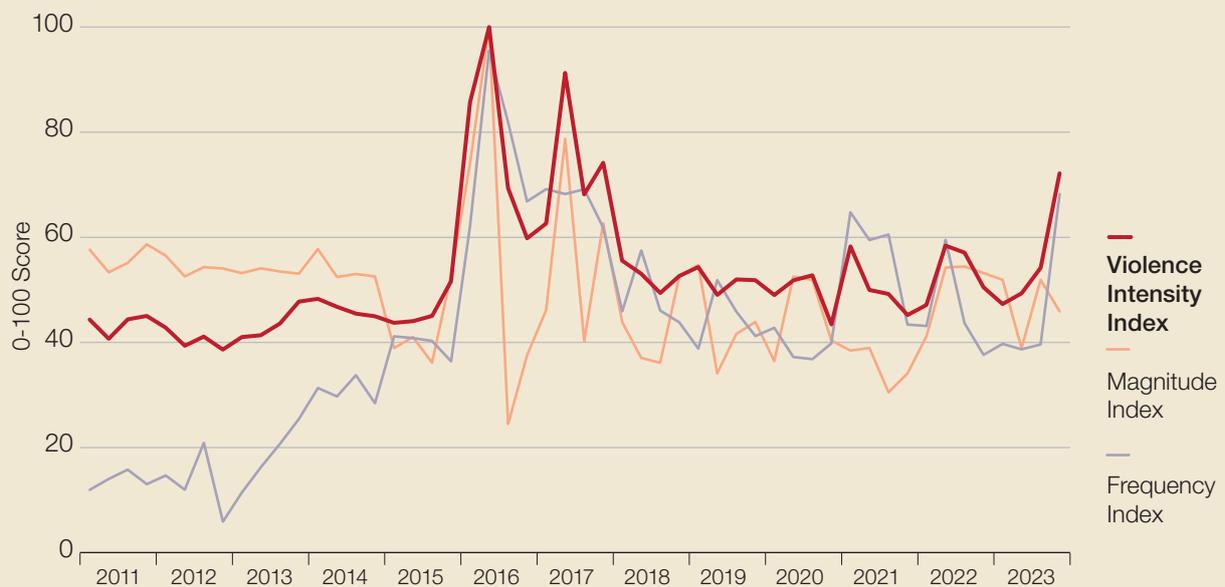
## Putting it all together: Violence Intensity

Although these two dimensions are thought of to move together, they can also move in opposite directions, which makes its measurement complicated. Given that these two dimensions are correspondingly of interest and importance, and imply different outcomes, equal weights are assigned to both the frequency and magnitude indices.

**Figure K** shows the VII together with the magnitude and frequency indices from 2011 to 2023. It shows that the two dimensions of intensity moved opposite each other as the first half of the period described less frequent conflict that resulted in more casualties compared to the latter half.

While this short study presented here is a daily index, these new measures can be aggregated in years or provinces, depending on one's inquiry.

**Figure K: Violence Intensity Index, quarterly data**



## Looking beyond measuring violence intensity

The goal of this short exercise is to show the variety of indicators that Conflict Alert can introduce to monitor, assess, and perchance predict conflict patterns in the region. The logical next step of this synthesis is to perform further tests and confirmatory steps to thoroughly explain violence intensity. Treating the frequency indicators as a Poisson distribution<sup>9</sup>, for example, can identify changes in frequency and determine turning points of conflict events (Hayes 1973). Integrating other variables such as land area, population and economic measures can illustrate the scale of violence intensity better.

<sup>9</sup> Fitting these conflict incidents in a Poisson distribution is a statistical approach to treat these events occurring at a constant rate within a time period. The Poisson distribution, named after French mathematician Siméon Denis Poisson, is commonly used to model discrete count data like the Conflict Alert dataset. The model can also be used to predict 'shocks' or black swan events such as outbreaks of large-scale conflicts.

## Limitations

The analysis provided in this article has its limitations. **First**, the index fails to incorporate conflict vulnerability and its various dimensions. Note that the methodology adopted in this article is highly based on quantifiable records of violence and does not consider the difference on how individuals or communities in different location manage tensions, contain violence, or how they rebuild social relationships after a violent incident.

**Second**, the index fails to incorporate the indirect costs of conflict. The data contains direct human cost such as number of individuals killed, missing, or injured but it does not account for the indirect socio-economic costs of conflicts, as well as opportunity costs. These include degradation of social and economic networks, loss of human capital, foregone revenues from stalled investments and employment losses.

**Third**, since the analysis adopted utilizes a microeconomic approach i.e., per conflict incident rather than a per year/province approach, it is subject to data limitations. One of the data limitations is that it does not provide a representative count of the number of displaced individuals per conflict incident as well as the duration and distance of their displacement. Available data on displacement, which is externally sourced from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), only accounts for the number of families displaced in a year for a given province.

**Lastly**, the index values presented in this article cannot be used to compare to other Violence Intensity Indices elsewhere in the Philippines and even on the same Conflict Alert BARMM data but with a different timeline i.e., cannot use VII of 2011-2023 to VII of 2011-2024. The Principal Component Analysis (PCA) is sensitive to the number of observations in each dataset, for example, the resulting index values would be different if there would be an increased number of observations due to a longer period covered.



Workers transport lumber in Bongao, the capital of Tawi-Tawi, a province that has seen relatively low numbers of conflict incidents over the past thirteen years compared to other areas in the Bangsamoro region. The Old Chinese Pier, a bustling center in Bongao, is where traders from Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, and even Sabah, and Indonesia sell a wide variety of marine and agricultural products. **📍 Martin San Diego**



# Conclusion



## Conclusion

### Peace cannot be conjured

It is difficult to make claims about development and peace by conjuring a magical peace that collides with the dull and usual reality of war. The recent pronouncement of the President in the 2024 SONA emphasized “the improved peace and order situation, good governance — not to mention high hopes and confidence amongst its people” in the region. The President even alluded to good governance for having reduced poverty levels in the region.

The evidence does not confirm or prove the idea of a peace momentum that the regional and national government have repeatedly declared through numerous pronouncements about improved peace and order and good governance. The data instead indicates new sources of instability and a conflict rebound that may go higher with the upcoming elections and its aftermath.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) in 2024 succinctly spoke of the real status of the conflict-to-peace transition when it noted that, “conflict is surging, in the form of feuds among clans and political rivals, but also rebel infighting, particularly in central Mindanao. Although confined to pockets of the island, the recurrent skirmishes cast a shadow over the delicate transition.”<sup>10</sup>

Improvements in poverty levels are a welcome development, but tracing causality to “good governance” is not only farfetched, it is devoid of agency. There is no identification nor explanation for the sort of governance measures or outputs that caused the change. CCAA’s own studies show only that the places where poverty has gone down have also seen a dramatic rise in illicit-drug related violence.

### Real public perceptions about moral governance

The fact that most of the violence is happening at the seat of the regional government speaks

volumes about the fragility and weakness of the state and the fractionalization in state building and governance.

There is no weaker state than that which cannot ensure peace nor discipline and control forces directly within its reach. Political infighting and divisions within the ranks of the ruling authority, the unmet normalization and decommissioning targets, and long delays in crucial legislation on land and other resource issues do not conjure responsiveness and flexibility, but more of the same dishonesty and deception that characterized previous regimes.

Malfeasance and corruption in government are some of the real issues in governance that have not been tackled publicly and thoroughly. Government agencies such as the Commission on Audit, the Ombudsman, and the Sandiganbayan can begin by evaluating how “moral governance” is implemented and practiced in the BARMM.

### Fragile hopes and shaky confidence

The “high hopes and confidence” over a so-called democratic transition is marred by violent attacks using illegal guns and automatic weapons, the displacement of indigenous peoples, women, and children, and the continuing scourge of terrorism and extremism.

Accounts have been read and voices heard about promises dashed and commitments ignored during the last three years. In 2023, the ICG’s report on the peace process enumerated the perils facing the Bangsamoro region at a critical time, including the fragile peace that is not irreversible (ICG 2023). Meanwhile, the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict sounded off the alarm of a looming explosion of violence as the region headed towards the 2025 regional elections (IPAC 2024). Several research and policy institutes including the Institute for Autonomy and Governance (2024), Oxfam Philippines (2019) and Council for Climate and Conflict Action (2023 to 2024) have constantly monitored the lingering violence that afflicts the Bangsamoro.

<sup>10</sup> International Crisis Group. 2024. The Philippines: Keeping the Bangsamoro Peace Process on Track. Accessed July 15, 2024. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/philippines/philippines-keeping-the-bangsamoro-peace-process-on-track>

Yet the rigmarole continues even in the face of granular evidence from conflict monitoring that can no longer be ignored. On the other hand, some encouraging stories did emerge, in which honesty and truth prevailed. In 2023, CCAA reported that the barangay elections were the bloodiest recorded in the history of the region, a statement rebuffed and assailed by vested interests who sought to conceal the extent of violence in the conflict to peace transition. However, it was eventually validated by the PNP less than a week later when it declared that it had indeed been the deadliest electoral battle according to their own figures. In early 2024, the BWC also cited Conflict Alert data to underscore the resilient gender inequalities in the region.

### Where the writ is weak, peace is robust

Peace appears to be more robust the farther one gets from the center of the regional state. Across the Bangsamoro from 2021 to 2023, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi had far lower numbers in terms of both incidents and deaths, even when weighed per capita and per square kilometer. Apart from the size of the population, these two islands sustained the conflict paradox of achieving peace despite their distance and limited access to the regional and central state.

Distance did not mean a lack of acquiescence to central authority nor autonomy from a countervailing authority. Distance from the central and regional state instead provoked local “men of prowess” or the much-maligned traditional political leaders to trust and depend mainly on themselves. Political elites carved out an environment where local political settlements were reached and enforced, clan feuds were mediated, regulations were few and enterprises were seldom taxed, and deterrence was achieved with everyone possessing weapons.

This social contract allowed provincial political elites impose discipline and control in their areas and deliver a peace that endures. Traditional political (trad-pols) leaders gave more stability and order with very little intervention or support from the regional authority.

## Risks and steps forward

### Risks

**One**, the conflict picture portends an increased level of violence across the region as the 2025 political battle looms closer. All provinces will see violence, but the Bangsamoro mainland, or Maguindanao for that matter, will experience the worst.

**Two**, the conflict terrain prior to the 2025 elections will see deaths and displacements multiply among vulnerable sectors such as the NMIPs, especially among their women and children. Deaths, injuries, and displacements are rising already as instability and uncertainty mounts.

**Three**, the internal armed struggles involving the MILF, MNLF, BIFF, DI, and the CNN are bound to intensify as armed groups directly intervene in electoral contests at local and regional level. The situation lends itself to collective and coordinated armed attacks against state forces at various levels, including efforts to shame the national government and the regional authority.

**Four**, the links between illicit drugs, weapons and electoral campaigns are getting stronger, and drug money is beginning to fuel the campaigns of politicians and fund the security requirements of clans and other armed groups.

### Steps forward: all hands-on-deck for the 2025 elections

**One**, redundant and autonomous monitoring systems and organizations at various levels need to be supported to do their work. Their integrity, autonomy, and independence in conflict monitoring and survey research must be protected and enhanced. The research and academic community must hold government to account and work together to prevent actions that intimidate, pressure, censure, or neutralize independent surveys and studies.

**Two**, the 2025 elections require strong and collaborative responses from the media. Tri-media outlets and watchdogs, including social media, in cooperation with research and academic groups can begin to cooperate to

prevent the spread of fake news and panic that can be manipulated to prevent a peaceful election, or worse, lead to a failure of elections.

**Three**, mediating violent and longstanding feuds and deterring revenge need to be done as early as possible, before polarization occurs and hostilities erupt during the elections. Joint polarization monitoring platforms can be established to share information, shape analysis, and prevent perpetrators from provoking collective violence.

**Four**, humanitarian and legal aid groups need to prepare early for rescue and support, and early response. A joint humanitarian and security task force involving humanitarian groups, security forces, and quick response groups must be mobilized for action before, during, and after the elections.

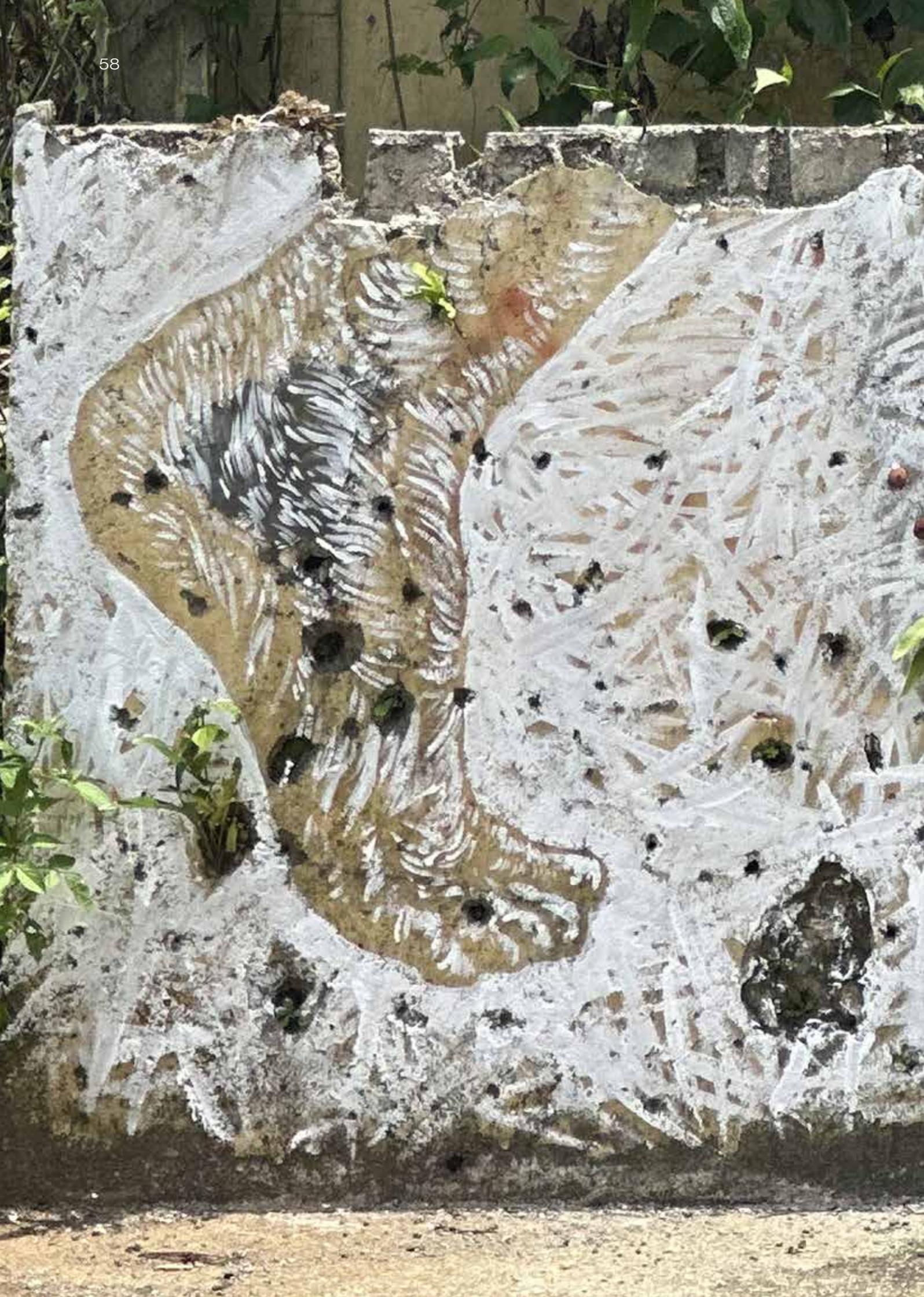
**Finally**, the OPAPRU stands out as the key government agency charged with sustaining the peace process, notwithstanding the hostility of Congress—particularly on the decommissioning process. Yet, appeasing violence instead of curing it is only a short-term solution to a longstanding problem.

As OPAPRU has acted against all odds to protect a fragile peace, it can still ringfence Maguindanao's ground zero from violence during the 2025 elections. Making South Upi, Upi, and Datu Odin Sinsuat impervious to election-related violence is a first step. A development response to the needs of marginalized and displaced non-Moro indigenous peoples is the next step, alongside the massive investments in camp transformation for the MILF.





Families of construction workers have sought refuge in ruined and abandoned homes in the most affected area of Marawi City. There has been an influx of laborers and workers in the City due to the ongoing rehabilitation and reconstruction. Public infrastructures such as mosques and roads have been rebuilt but many residents remain in temporary shelters. August 2024.  **Najib Zacaria**





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## ANNEX 1

# Data tables

## Conflict incidents and deaths in BARMM, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Incidents	871	643	1,059	1,500	2,303	4,362	4,132	2,898	2,730	2,439	2,752	2,296	2,475
Deaths	509	330	491	664	827	1,241	2,261	907	863	791	668	677	760

## Conflict incidents and deaths, 2020-2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Incidents	2,439	2,752	2,296	2,475	9,962
Deaths	791	668	677	760	2,896

## Displacement and Injuries in the Bangsamoro, 2020-2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Displacement	66,640	108,524	65,036	129,712
Injuries	713	616	565	726

## Conflict incidents by province, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Basilan*	203	184	174	185	380	796	631	468	419	434	397	319	325
Lanao del Sur	138	79	285	306	420	514	941	372	519	416	519	591	603
Maguindanao**	328	203	401	847	1,111	2,358	1,876	1,409	1,161	1,090	1,260	953	1,033
Sulu	147	117	150	107	332	559	553	508	453	327	355	293	356
Tawi-Tawi	55	60	49	55	60	135	131	141	178	172	221	140	158

## Conflict deaths by province, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Basilan*	111	108	70	99	115	220	137	97	78	94	85	109	106
Lanao del Sur	90	48	108	106	184	310	1,358	99	132	104	119	176	162
Maguindanao**	204	92	177	342	364	444	496	450	431	404	346	283	356
Sulu	86	71	115	96	142	221	231	220	197	158	79	82	94
Tawi-Tawi	18	11	21	21	22	46	39	41	25	31	39	27	42

\* (incl Isabela City) \*\* (incl Cotabato City)

### Conflict incidence per 100,000 persons, by province, 2020-2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Maguindanao**	65	74	54	58	251
Basilan*	78	69	53	52	252
Lanao del Sur	35	42	47	47	171
Tawi-Tawi	39	49	30	33	151
Sulu	33	34	27	32	126

### Conflict deaths per 100,000 persons, by province, 2020-2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Maguindanao**	24	20	16	20	80
Basilan*	17	15	18	17	67
Lanao del Sur	9	10	14	13	46
Tawi-Tawi	7	9	6	9	31
Sulu	16	8	8	8	40

### Conflict incidence per 1,000 sq.km., by province, 2020-2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Maguindanao**	107	124	94	102	427
Basilan*	118	108	87	88	401
Sulu	72	78	64	78	292
Tawi-Tawi	47	61	39	44	191
Lanao del Sur	28	34	39	40	141

### Conflict deaths per 1,000 sq.km., by province, 2020-2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Maguindanao**	40	34	28	35	137
Basilan*	26	23	30	29	108
Sulu	35	17	18	21	91
Tawi-Tawi	9	11	7	12	39
Lanao del Sur	7	8	12	11	38

### Main causes of conflict incidents, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Shadow Economy	348	205	387	498	572	1,504	1,538	1,669	1,544	1,310	1,773	1,424	1,615
Identity Issues	134	71	102	204	219	731	1,234	602	546	510	601	427	457
Political Issues	93	92	167	98	159	257	707	353	325	269	231	256	280
Common Crime	85	57	93	272	483	890	724	429	391	247	234	156	161
Resource Issues	28	17	20	29	23	51	58	71	57	77	58	47	49
Governance Issues	29	8	14	28	33	62	30	185	200	313	216	66	35

### Main causes of conflict deaths, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Identity Issues	145	36	94	91	125	528	1,696	455	404	318	289	248	330
Shadow Economy	110	51	91	107	103	219	293	306	277	250	261	250	290
Political Issues	119	79	116	196	224	450	1,567	353	282	234	130	119	186
Resource Issues	51	12	19	21	9	9	19	33	24	34	10	12	33
Governance Issues	10	6	9	17	28	57	41	28	37	30	36	23	24
Common Crime	18	13	13	22	23	22	33	20	28	30	50	29	21

\* (incl Isabela City) \*\* (incl Cotabato City)

### Gender-based and child abuse incidents, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Gender-based violence	15	17	14	85	119	334	306	125	98	102	134	33	17
Child Abuse	1	1	1	18	13	167	72	72	55	69	71	3	3

### Gender-based violence by two-year periods: 2018 to 2019, 2020 to 2021, 2022 to 2023

	2018-2019	2020-2021	2022-2023
Gender-based violence	223	236	50

### Gender-based violence by province, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Basilan*	5	5	1	6	11	103	68	13	27	37	38	1	1
Lanao del Sur	0	2	3	12	18	23	40	14	16	11	21	13	8
Maguindanao**	8	6	6	64	75	185	167	79	41	41	60	16	6
Sulu	1	2	2	0	7	11	23	16	12	13	9	3	1
Tawi-Tawi	1	2	2	3	8	12	8	3	2	0	6	0	1

### Conflict incidents and deaths in Sulu, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Incidents	147	117	150	107	332	559	553	508	453	327	355	293	356
Deaths	86	71	115	96	142	221	231	220	197	158	79	82	94

### Conflict deaths by province, average three-year period, 2011-2013 versus 2021-2023

	2011-'13	2021-'23
Maguindanao**	158	328
Lanao del Sur	82	152
Basilan*	96	100
Sulu	91	85
Tawi-Tawi	17	36

### Main causes of conflict incidents in Sulu, 2020-2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Shadow Economy Issues	180	212	166	260
Identity Issues	87	81	68	33
Political Issues	61	44	45	22
Common Crimes	14	11	5	7
Governance Issues	44	39	4	4
Resource Issues	9	5	3	3

\* (incl Isabela City) \*\* (incl Cotabato City)

### Main causes of conflict deaths in Sulu, 2020-2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Shadow Economy Issues	42	23	25	22
Identity Issues	95	30	27	39
Political Issues	85	15	8	19
Common Crimes	1	3	0	1
Governance Issues	5	5	0	4
Resource Issues	1	0	0	1

### Top 10 specific causes of conflict incidents, 2020-2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Illegal drugs	730	1,056	727	893
Illegal weapons	470	541	489	552
Personal grudge	62	144	153	209
Elections	6	9	107	145
Clan feud	106	137	114	125
Violent extremism	233	199	131	108
Robbery	94	99	101	104
Carjacking	50	53	58	57
Land conflict	36	29	22	32
Illicit financial transactions	15	31	26	28

### Top 10 specific causes of conflict deaths, 2020-2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Illegal weapons	228	232	222	271
Violent extremism	209	117	78	121
Personal grudge	39	86	85	120
Clan feud	64	83	84	91
Elections	10	1	26	37
Land conflict	31	6	12	31
Illegal drugs	73	56	35	30
Executive and judicial decisions	24	36	17	22
Robbery	16	29	20	16
Elected officials	1	4	0	15

### Violent extremism incidents and deaths in the Bangsamoro, by province, 2021-2023

	Deaths					Incidents			
	2021	2022	2023	Total		2021	2022	2023	Total
Tawi-Tawi	4	0	0	4	Tawi-Tawi	8	1	1	10
Basilan*	10	13	10	33	Basilan*	22	22	20	64
Sulu	15	8	19	42	Sulu	44	38	14	96
Lanao del Sur	11	25	27	63	Lanao del Sur	18	27	25	70
Maguindanao**	77	32	65	174	Maguindanao**	107	43	48	198

\* (incl Isabela City) \*\* (incl Cotabato City)

### Violent extremism incidents and deaths in the Bangsamoro, 2016-2023

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Incidents	170	692	274	198	233	199	131	108
Deaths	418	1564	319	253	209	117	78	121

### Violent extremism incidents and deaths in Sulu, 2016-2023

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Incidents	35	63	86	72	59	44	36	14
Deaths	68	84	116	99	85	15	8	19

### Violent extremism incidents and deaths by actors, 2021-2023

	Deaths					Incidents			
	2021	2022	2023	Total		2021	2022	2023	Total
Dawlah Islamiya	23	26	55	104	Dawlah Islamiya	20	30	37	87
Abu Sayyaf	29	17	28	74	Abu Sayyaf	72	55	29	156
BIFF	65	24	10	99	BIFF	92	35	24	151
Maute group	5	0	0	5	Maute group	7	1	0	8

### Incidents involving violent extremist actors, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Dawlah Islamiya	0	0	0	0	0	1	382	16	45	23	20	33	39
Abu Sayyaf	59	35	44	33	76	72	137	134	84	87	75	53	33
BIFF/BIFM	12	22	39	46	63	76	136	126	73	109	83	35	27
Maute group	0	0	0	0	0	16	419	13	7	5	7	1	0

### Conflict incidents by month, 2021-2023

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2021	192	298	281	227	191	265	229	227	244	212	200	186	2,752
2022	227	189	141	144	242	190	189	215	234	197	188	140	2,296
2023	199	163	215	197	210	200	212	206	177	273	223	200	2,475

### Election-related violence and deaths in the Bangsamoro, election years

	2013	2016	2018	2019	2022	2023
Incidents	26	16	42	83	95	140
Deaths	9	10	6	8	20	48

### Election-related violence, by province, election years

	2013	2016	2018	2019	2022	2023
Lanao del Sur	12	2	14	28	43	59
Maguindanao**	24	16	21	32	37	47
Basilan*	4	5	9	13	7	22
Sulu	1	7	1	11	4	8
Tawi-Tawi	0	0	1	2	4	4

### Election-related deaths, by province, election years

	2013	2016	2018	2019	2022	2023
Basilan*	1	1	4	2	0	8
Lanao del Sur	3	1	0	5	12	18
Maguindanao**	19	7	3	2	8	21
Sulu	1	3	3	2	0	0
Tawi-Tawi	0	0	0	0	0	1

### Incidents and deaths due to land conflicts in the Bangsamoro, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Incidents	17	11	10	19	13	23	46	30	27	36	29	22	32
Deaths	42	12	12	15	9	7	17	22	21	31	6	12	31

### Conflict incidents and deaths due to clan feud, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Incidents	64	31	59	68	60	65	106	95	139	106	137	114	125
Deaths	87	20	48	55	58	59	83	67	103	64	83	84	91

\* (incl Isabela City) \*\* (incl Cotabato City)

### Incident-death ratio of clan feud

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Incidents	3	14	11	5	1	10	9	10	4	5	5	4	11
Deaths	4	9	9	4	1	9	7	7	3	3	3	3	8

### Incidents and deaths due to clan feud, by province, 2011-2023

	Incidents	Deaths
Maguindanao**	439	370
Lanao del Sur	522	324
Sulu	93	113
Basilan*	108	84
Tawi-Tawi	7	11

### Violent incidents and deaths due to illegal guns, 2011-2023

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Incidents	140	68	173	206	161	286	366	491	495	422	503	436	480
Deaths	94	35	54	84	75	91	184	250	249	213	230	217	248

### Conflict incidents by number of causes, as percent of total

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Single Cause	44	43	44	42	39	46	42	54	49	46	56	52	53
Multiple Causes	19	14	16	18	14	18	31	30	33	35	30	27	27
Undetermined	37	43	40	40	47	36	27	16	18	19	14	21	20



\* (incl Isabela City) \*\* (incl Cotabato City)

## ANNEX 2

# Conflict Alert methodology

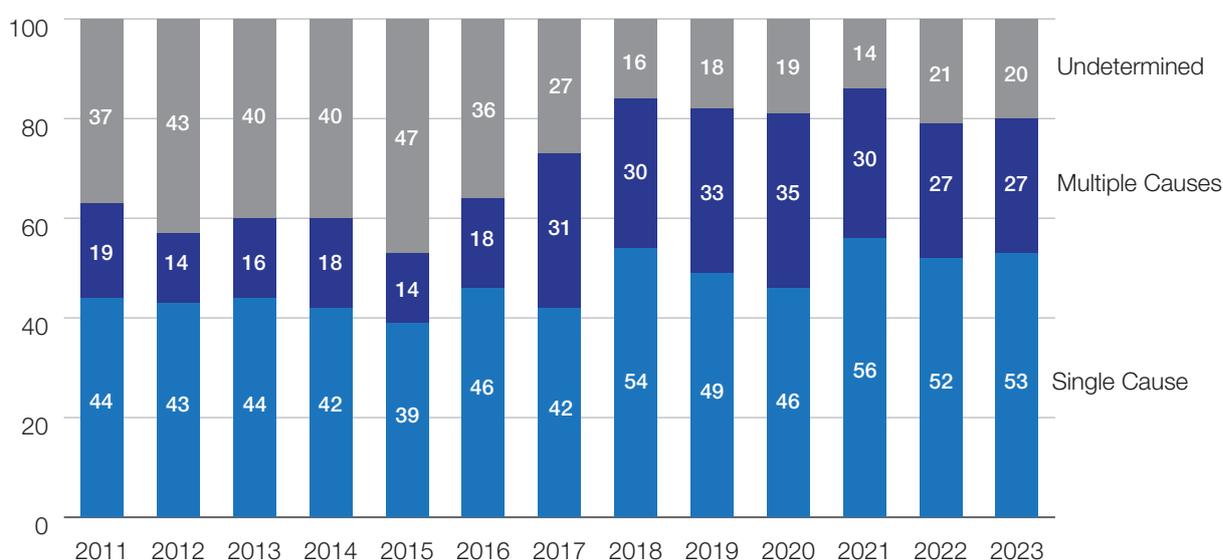
**Conflict Alert is a subnational conflict monitoring system** that tracks the incidence, causes, and human costs of violent conflict in the Philippines, specifically, in the BARMM. It uses police and media reports to gather violent conflict data in the five (5) provinces of the Bangsamoro region, including the city of Isabela.<sup>11</sup>

The monitoring system also gathers data from 15 print media outlets since it started collecting reports in 2011. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, four (4) of these media outlets closed. The data from the remaining eleven (11) were used for this report.

The third source of data is the Multi-stakeholder Validation Group (MSVG). The MSVG is composed of members from diverse backgrounds, with local knowledge of violent conflict in the areas covered by Conflict Alert. They can be church people, civil servants, members of community groups, women and youth, or law enforcers (active or retired). The MSVG members are convened by three (3) academic partners of CCAA strategically located in Cotabato City, Zamboanga City and Lanao del Sur.<sup>12</sup>

In line with the aim of CCAA to generate immediate or near real-time information of

## Conflict incidents by number of causes, as percent of total



<sup>11</sup> There are now six provinces with the division of Maguindanao to Maguindanao Sur and Maguindanao Norte. Eight municipalities have been added to the Bangsamoro region from the special geographic areas (SGA) within North Cotabato province that voted to join the BARMM.

<sup>12</sup> Notre Dame University in Cotabato City which covers Maguindanao and Cotabato City, Western Mindanao State University in Zamboanga City covering the Bangsamoro Island Provinces and Dansalan College in Iligan City covering the province of Lanao del Sur.

emerging conflict risks and dynamics, this edition of the Conflict Alert Triennial Report utilized another database, the Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS).<sup>13</sup> The reports gathered by CEMS come from the MSVG and the Early Response Network (ERN) organized by CCAA in the mainland provinces of Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao.

Violent conflict is the unit of analysis used in recording these data. It is defined by CCAA as an instance wherein force or the threat to use force is used by individuals or groups to assert or defend their individual or collective interests.

An encoding platform is used to record and analyse the data. The platform records incidents of violent conflict and its causes, human costs, economic costs, actors' affiliation and effect, manifestations and the location of the incidents.

The results are analysed and tabulated according to six main causes of conflict: shadow economy-related violence, identity-based violence, political violence, resource-related violence, governance-related violence, and common crimes.

Specific causes of violent conflicts are also analysed and tabulated to determine exact triggers of violence. Incidents can be single or multi-causal as to cause. There are at least fifty-six (56) different specific causes underneath the main causes.

The 13 years of granular data collected and analysed in the monitoring system has seen improvements in the determination of causes of conflicts. From 2021 to 2023, the monitoring system has been able to determine no less than 80 percent of the causes of all violent conflicts in the database. More than 30 percent of violent conflicts had multiple causes of violence over the past three years.

Constant improvements in monitoring and analysis, quality control and validation has enabled an upsurge in the determination of causes. More detailed police reporting and the social capital developed and strengthened between CCAA and the MSVG

members, including the security sector, over the past ten years have also contributed to the better determination of causes.

The Conflict Alert database now contains 13 years panel data of violent conflict in the Bangsamoro region. It has and continues to witness the ebb and flow of violent conflict in a region transitioning to peace.

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**Conflict Alert tracks and analyses violent conflict, defined as incident/s where two or more parties use intimidation, force or physical violence to exert control, settle misunderstandings or grievances, or defend and expand their individual or collective interests (e.g., social, economic, political resources and power, etc.).**

**Data Sources.** Key sources of data are the incident reports from the Philippine National Police (PNP) and news reports from 11 local and national newspapers. Multi-Stakeholder Validation Groups (MSVGs), composed of local people with knowledge of local conflicts, also add incidents to the database. MSVG members' backgrounds range from security provision, crime prevention, conflict research, and crime monitoring, to peacebuilding, local governance, policy formulation, journalism, and grassroots knowledge. The multiple data sources—police, media and the community— make Conflict Alert the largest repository of data on subnational conflict in the Philippines. From collection, the data undergo a strict process of evaluation, validation, and analysis before they are shared with the public.

**Data Gathering.** Incident reports are collected from the regional, provincial, and city offices of the PNP. Reports from 11 national and local newspapers are gathered.

**Data Sorting.** Incidents are classified into violent and non-violent. Only the violent conflict incidents are encoded and subjected to analysis.

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<sup>13</sup> The Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS), developed by International Alert Philippines (now managed by CCAA) in partnership with Early Response Network (ERN), provides real-time updates via SMS and two-way radio on critical and emerging conflicts in the Bangsamoro. These reports are recorded in the database and sent to relevant stakeholders to prevent escalation of conflict.

**Data Encoding.** At the first stage, trained encoders record all details of the incidents using an online encoding form. They determine the cause or causes of the incidents as provided by the police and newspaper reports. They check for links between newly encoded incidents and previously recorded incidents, or for conflict strings. They geotag the incidents. Duplicate entries are voided using a search facility. At the next stage, data reviewers check the encoded data, in particular, the cause or causes of the incidents and conflict strings. At the third stage, a second reviewer makes random checks to further ensure data quality.

A distinct feature of Conflict Alert is the multi tagging of incidents to capture their multicausality. This sharpens the analysis of conflict triggers and promotes understanding of conflict dynamics. Multi-tagging, however, creates a discrepancy between the number of reported incidents and the number of causes. For example, an incident involving illegal drugs and weapons, both shadow economy issues, is counted as one incident in the database. But as to cause, it is counted as one incident under illegal drugs and another incident under illicit weapons.

Conflict Alert also enables identification of conflict strings. Conflict strings refer to episodes of violence arising from a discrete incident with one or multiple causes. It can also emerge when the singular source of violence at the outset triggers other issues or causes of conflict. The database is able to track how a single incident is reproduced through violent confrontations or retaliatory actions. For example, politically motivated conflict can induce an episode of violence that fuses with shadow economy or ethnic and clan identity issues, as it spirals out of control.

**Data Validation.** Multi-stakeholder Validation Groups (MSVGs) validate the list of violent conflict incidents. They also add details, such as the cause or causes of the conflict, when these are not provided by police and newspaper reports. Members also add incidents they know of that they did not find on the list. They use the meetings to discuss conflict trends to enhance the analysis of the data. An MSVG is a multi-stakeholder body that draws together

different individuals with distinctive expertise to examine and validate conflict data, determine the cause/s of conflict, identify conflict strings, and enrich data analysis. Three MSVGs have been established to cover three geographical clusters: Zamboanga-Basilan-Sulu Tawi Tawi (Zambasulta); Maguindanao; and Lanao del Sur. They are convened by academic partners, the Western Mindanao State University, Notre Dame University and Dansalan College Foundation Incorporated.

**Data Analysis.** Data are tabulated and analysed according to conflict incidence, density, causes, strings, and trends. In addition, the severity (frequency) and magnitude (or cost in terms of people injured, killed and displaced) of violence are examined using Alert's Violence Intensity Index to help pinpoint priorities and interventions in conflict-affected areas. At this stage, cause or causes of violent conflict are doubly checked to see patterns or trends. Related incidents are examined for conflict strings.

**Data Visualization.** The findings are presented using visual tools such as charts, graphs and tables. Incidents are also mapped, providing locational context to the incidents. Users of the Conflict Alert website may generate their own charts, graphs, tables and maps using its charting and mapping tools.

**Data Dissemination.** Results are presented to key stakeholders such as government agencies, local government units, civil society groups, academic institutions, private institutions, and the security sector. The whole dataset is also stored in a comma-separated values or CSV files and written up in reports that are uploaded to the Conflict Alert website and made available to the public for free.

## ANNEX 3

# Definition of terms

**Violent conflict.** An incident where two or more parties use violence to settle misunderstandings and grievances and/or defend or expand their individual or collective interests. Violence entails the use of force or physical violence, or the threat to use force or physical violence.

**Vertical conflict.** These are separatist or non-separatist armed struggles against the State, including terrorist actions that destabilize a State. Rebellions, insurgencies and extremist violence fall under vertical conflict.

**Horizontal conflict.** These are conflicts between individuals, families, clans, ethnic groups, rival insurgent factions, political parties, private armed groups, among others.

**Causal categories.** Conflicts are categorized according to their main cause and specific cause. The main causes of conflict are shadow economy issues, common crimes, political issues, identity issues, resource issues, and governance issues. Under each main cause are specific causes. Conflict Alert presently has 59 specific causes of conflict.

**Shadow economies.** These pertain to the informal or underground sectors of the economy that tend to fuel violent conflict. In Mindanao, these include the illegal drug and illicit firearm trades, kidnap for-ransom, cattle rustling, smuggling, illegal gambling, carjacking, and human trafficking.

**Common crimes.** These are cases of robbery, damage to properties, and violent conflict triggered by alcohol intoxication, among others.

**Political issues.** These include vertical conflict such as rebellion and extremist violence, and horizontal conflict caused by electoral competition, abuse of power and authority or political repression, and violent struggles between rival insurgent groups for politico-military control.

**Identity issues.** These include clashes between families and clans, violence arising from personal grudges between individuals, and gender-based violence. Religious conflict, an identity issue, is closely linked to extremist violence, a political issue, and manifests as brutal acts targeting individuals or groups holding different beliefs.

**Resource issues.** These are conflicts over ownership, use, and control of land, water and other natural resources.

**Governance issues.** These are violent struggles for government resources and rents, including conflicts due to bidding processes, violent responses to lawful actions and processes, and other government-related transactions and/or development projects, including COVID-19 issues.

**Undetermined causes.** If the cause or causes cannot be determined, the incident information on the manifestation of violence, for example, shooting, stabbing, mauling, etc., is still stored in the Conflict Alert database. The most common manifestations are: shooting, arrest, confiscation, murder, assault, clash/encounter, buy-bust/entrapment, and threat/grave coercion.

## ANNEX 4

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Sama Bajau navigate the waters near the port of Jolo, the principal maritime gateway of Sulu province, October 7, 2022. © **Martin San Diego**





# Artist's statement

## **“Sigaw Na Sana’y Marinig”**

Brgy. Romangaob, South Upi,  
Maguindanao del Sur

**“..kung kulang sa kanila yung isang katawan ng manok, kahit balahibo na lang para may bahagi din kami.”**

*– mga salita mula sa Tribal Leader ng Teduray-Lambangian indigenous group*

Bitbit ng mga katutubong Teduray-Lambangian ang mga panawagan na sana ay makabalik sila sa kanilang lupang ninuno sa bayan ng South Upi, Maguindanao. Bagama’t bakwit sila sa mga “transitory shelters,” wala itong katiyakan na pangmatagalang tirahan dahil pwede itong kunin muli ng gobyerno at mapilitan silang maging bakwit ulit. Sumisigaw na sana’y makabalik sa kanilang lupang ninuno sa kabundukan at matayuan ng kahit mumunting paaralan para sa kanilang mga anak.

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## **“Please Hear Our Plea”**

Brgy. Romangaob, South Upi,  
Maguindanao del Sur

**“If the entire chicken is not enough for them, just please leave us the feathers so we have our part.”**

*– words of the Tribal Leader of the Teduray-Lambangian indigenous group*

The indigenous Teduray-Lambangian people carry the undying hope of returning to their ancestral lands in South Upi, Maguindanao. Currently living in “transitory shelters,” they face the looming possibility that the government could reclaim the land, forcing them to become evacuees once again. Their plea is not only to go home to their sacred mountains, but also for even a small school to be built to secure a better future for their children.



## “Kambalingan”

Ground Zero, Marawi City

Kambalingan ay salitang Maranaw na pag-uwi o “going home” sa salitang ingles.

Mula sa pakikinig sa mga kwento ng kaibigan na nakatira mismo sa Ground Zero, ramdam ko ang bigat, pighati, kalungkutan, paglaban at pagbangon sa araw-araw na matutunghayan ang durog na durog na mga tahanan at gusali. Halos pitong taon na ring nakalilipas ang Marawi Siege pero sariwa pa rin sa kanyang alaala ang lahat—ang mga putukan ng baril, nakabibinging mga bomba, sigaw ng mga tao, itsura ng mga patay at maging saksi sa pagtupok ng apoy sa kanyang tahanan. Sa kasalukuyan, bakas pa rin ang mga bala sa mga pader, nagtatayuan na ang mga damo sa kapaligiran, walang mga kapitbahay na makakasalamuha, walang mga batang naglalaro’t nagtatakbuhan sa labas—lugar na nagmistulang abandonado.

Winika ng kaibigan ko na maglakad kami sa buong Ground Zero, pagmasdan at damhin ang kapaligiran. Mga ihip ng hangin ang maririnig, ramdam ang mga kaluluwang sumisigaw ng hustisya. “Paano ka nabubuhay dito sa araw araw?” tanong ko sa kanya. “Isang paa ay nakaugat sa aking lupang sinilangan, isang paa naman ay pag-usad,” sagot niya.

## “Going Home”

Ground Zero, Marawi City

Kambalingan is a Maranaw word meaning “going home” in English.

From listening to the stories of my friend who lives in the Ground Zero of Marawi, I can feel the weight of his anguish, sorrow, and the struggle to live each day amidst the destruction caused by the war. Almost seven years have passed, but everything remains vivid in his memory—the sound of gunfire, deafening explosions, the screams of people, the sight of death, and witnessing the flames that engulfed his home. Even now, bullet marks are still visible on the walls, weeds have grown around the rubbles, there are no neighbors to talk to, no children playing and running outside—a place that has become hopelessly desolate.

My friend urged that we walk around Ground Zero, to witness and feel the energy of the surroundings. Only the sound of the wind can be heard, with the spirits crying out for justice. “How are you able to live here each day?” I asked him. “One foot is firmly rooted in my homeland, the other is moving forward,” he replied.

### About the artist

**Archie Oclos** is a multi-awarded street artist whose large-scale public murals vividly portray the lives and struggles of ordinary people. As a son of farmers, Archie has lived through injustice and oppression, which he expresses through his art, serving as both a witness and storyteller of these struggles. His body of work speaks uncompromisingly, conveying powerful messages that not only evoke empathy but also inspire action and ignite our curiosity to learn more.







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