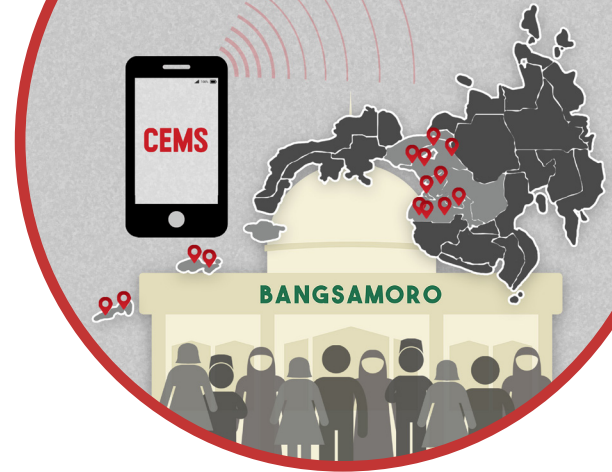


CRITICAL EVENTS MONITORING SYSTEM BULLETIN

Period covered: January 2020

Date of release: 22 April 2020



Inauspicious start to the year

As martial law ended at the close of 2019, the national government said Proclamation No. 55, which declared a state of national emergency, remains in effect. However, it's unclear what it can do against the resurgence of violence in Muslim Mindanao that had been observed even before martial law lifted.

Reports by Early Response Network (ERN) members indicated that violence had persisted in January. Ordinary civilians, government officials, and members of the security forces were targets in shooting incidents. The drug trade, suppressed by martial law, was on the rebound. Clans embroiled in feuds sought retribution that would ensnare their families and clans in a cycle of revenge killings or *rido*. In the hinterlands of Lanao and marshlands of Maguindanao, ISIS-linked groups continued to be a thorn in the military's side despite efforts to eliminate them or to woo members to surrender.¹

All these took place within a Bangsamoro that was in a state of flux – and would remain so in the months to come. The new regional government began operating under its own budget, amid high expectations of being able to deliver projects and programs to its mostly poor constituents.² In Marawi, dissatisfaction with the pace of reconstruction mounted, especially as millions budgeted for it had to revert to the Treasury because they were not disbursed

by the end of 2019 and as thousands of city residents remained displaced.³ Residents pelted the Task Force Bangon Marawi with complaints, while continuing to insist against a new military camp.⁴

Local government officials sought to preserve the order seen during the martial law period by continuing curfews and banning the carrying of firearms in public. But the violence could not be stemmed.

¹ ERN members sent around 180 reports to the Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) in January 2020, which were used for the writing of this bulletin. ERN members are autonomous individuals and members of groups with grassroots reach who monitor disputes and harness traditional, formal, and hybrid institutions and arrangements to defuse or resolve violent conflicts. Among them are women and youth leaders. Their reports are transmitted to CEMS through SMS, stored in a database, and processed for deployment of context-specific responses by key stakeholders on the ground.

² A. Macabalang, Manila Bulletin, *Bangsamoro parliament approves P65.6-B BARMM budget for 2020*, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2019/12/02/bangsamoro-parliament-approves-p65-6-b-barmm-budget-for-2020/> (accessed 11 March 2020).

³ B.O. de Vera, Inquirer.net, *P406M in Marawi funds for 2018 expire*, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1219861/p406m-in-marawi-funds-for-2018-expire> (accessed 11 March 2020).

⁴ A. Macabalang, Manila Bulletin, *Calls for resignation of TF Bangon Marawi head mount*, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2020/01/20/calls-for-resignation-of-tf-bangon-marawi-head-mount/>; C. L. Atienza, Manila Bulletin, *Solons ask Duterte to reconsider plan to establish second military camp in Marawi*, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2020/01/04/solons-ask-duterte-to-reconsider-plan-to-establish-second-military-camp-in-marawi/> (accessed 11 March 2020).

Killings fueled by multiplicity of causes

Shooting incidents victimized ordinary people and those holding positions of responsibility.

A high-profile victim was Guiaria B. Akmad, the Commission on Audit's supervising auditor for Maguindanao. She and her husband, a policeman who had asked to be personally detailed to her after she received threats, were shot by a gunman aboard a motorcycle driven by a companion. She bore multiple gunshot wounds and was already dead when she was brought to the hospital.⁵

Shootings and killings of members of the military and police and former and incumbent barangay officials – first noted last year – continued. Victims in January included: a soldier assigned at the 6th Infantry Division, Datu Odin Sinsuat town in Maguindanao; a former barangay chairman of Calanogas town in Lanao del Sur; barangay councilors of Brgy. Rosary Heights 8 and Brgy. Rosary Heights 11 in Cotabato City; and the chairwoman of Brgy. Bagua 1 in Cotabato City.

Some civilians who were merely going about their work were shot and killed. In Calanogas town in Lanao del Sur, a man engaged in the buying and selling of cows was shot and then robbed, while in Cotabato City, a fisherman was shot and killed.

The motivations – or causes – differed in every shooting incident, pointing to the difficulty of attaining resolution and apprehending the perpetrators. Guiara B. Akmad's assassination was believed to be related to her work as a state auditor – and indeed, she counted among many state auditors who were threatened, harassed or killed because of their work. The last report that Akmad signed contained 10 audit recommendations for the Maguindanao

The killings were enabled by the illegal firearms that widely proliferated in Lanao, Maguindanao, and the other Bangsamoro provinces.

provincial government, including the provision of supporting documents for P335 million in bank deposits that “could not be ascertained”.⁶

Military and policemen have been targeted in many attacks, also because of their work. The attacks were believed to be in reprisal for the implementation of martial law in Muslim Mindanao, particularly, for the operations against the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in Maguindanao.⁷

Killings of barangay officials were likely due to political jostling in anticipation of the next barangay election in December 2022. However, the case of Ella Biruar, chairwoman of Brgy. Bagua 1 in Cotabato City, was seen as also having to do with the illegal drug trade, as she had figured in a list of narco-politicians before she was eventually cleared.

The killings were enabled by the illegal firearms that widely proliferated in Lanao,

⁵ K. A. Calayag, *Tribune.net.ph, Mangudadatu denounces killing of CoA auditor*, <https://tribune.net.ph/index.php/2020/01/11/mangudadatu-denounces-killing-of-coa-auditor/> (accessed 11 March 2020).

⁶ Commission on Audit, *Annual Audit Report on the Provincial Government of Maguindanao for the calendar year ended December 31, 2018*, page iii, <https://www.coa.gov.ph/index.php/local-government-units/2018/category/7709-provinces> (accessed 11 March 2020).

⁷ J. Unson, *Philstar.com, Soldier wounded in BIFF attack*, <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2020/02/09/1991521/soldier-wounded-biff-attack> (accessed 11 March 2020).

Maguindanao, and the other Bangsamoro provinces. They were not only widespread; their owners or users have also taken to boldly displaying them, unlike during the martial law period when these individuals and groups had kept them hidden.

For instance, in Tubaran and Marogong towns in Lanao del Sur, groups of men – who were not members of the military, the police, or the Citizen Armed Force Geographical Unit – were openly seen holding firearms. They were surmised to be members of an armed group, criminal syndicate, or clans engaged in rido. In Marawi, two men bearing firearms and riding a motorcycle passed through one of the transitory shelters for families displaced by the 2017 war. Residents did not recognize either of them.

In another town in Lanao del Sur, residents, determined to keep their guns as the military swept through the villages to confiscate loose and illegal weapons, entrusted these to a group for safekeeping. They believed this group was out of the military's reach and they could reclaim their guns, which they said were acquired through much sacrifice, in the future.

Intractable illegal drug economy

Illegal drugs provided another source of violence, with raids, sting operations, and confiscations conducted by drug enforcement agents, together with the police and military, continuing from 2019. The years 2017 and 2018 had seen the number of illegal-drug related incidents in Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao fall, according to Conflict Alert, after spiking in 2016, the start of the Duterte administration's war on drug trade and use.⁸

In January, a buy-bust at the Mindanao State University Commercial Center in Marawi led to the arrest of two alleged drug pushers

and the confiscation of methamphetamine hydrochloride (or shabu) worth P6.8 million. In Lumbatan town in Lanao that same month, the military swooped down on a barangay to interdict a group of armed men believed to be peddling illegal drugs. In Marantao town, also in Lanao, a search at a checkpoint led to the arrest of a man with a sachet of shabu and drug paraphernalia in his bag. These incidents illustrate state agents' determination to implement the Duterte administration's policy on illegal drugs but also the limitations of their intervention, as nearly four years after the war on drugs was launched, the illegal drug economy has proven to be intractable. The buy-bust in Marawi may well indicate it's again thriving in this city, the center of the illegal drug trade in Muslim Mindanao prior to the war in 2017.⁹

When illegal drugs and firearms combine, the result is lethal. There's the case of Ella Biruar in Cotabato City, if it were indeed drug-related. Another case involved the attempt on the life of an asset of the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (although he was alleged to be involved in nefarious activities prior to his PDEA work and had collected enemies).¹⁰ The PDEA asset survived the mid-afternoon shootout in Brgy. Poblacion 6 in Cotabato City.

⁸ Conflict Alert is International Alert Philippines's conflict monitoring system utilizing police, media and community reports. See <https://conflictalert.info/>

⁹ R. Guiam and S. Schoofs, A Deadly Cocktail? Illicit drugs, politics and violent conflict in Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao, in F. Lara Jr. and S. Schoofs (eds.), *Out of the Shadows: Violent Conflict and the Real Economy of Mindanao*, Quezon City: International Alert Philippines and Ateneo de Manila University, 2016, page 127.

¹⁰ According to a news report, the target was an asset of the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group of the Bangsamoro region. See F. B. Cabrera, *Mindanews, Gunman killed in Cotabato City shootout*, <https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2020/01/gunman-killed-in-cotabato-city-shootout/> (accessed 11 March 2020).

Rido's links to drugs and guns

Rido can develop from the illicit drugs-guns nexus. The family of a politician in Lanao, who was ambushed after green-lighting a drug raid on a political rival, is reportedly preparing to retaliate.

Gun violence will also perpetuate clan feuding, as the two parties in conflict seek retribution. The ERNs reported in January that families of victims of ambushes a few months earlier were ready to strike back at their adversaries. As to when, that's not known.

Rido can develop from the illicit drugs-gun nexus.

Unending ISIS problem

Proving equally difficult to eradicate, violent extremism has continued to preoccupy troops stationed in Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao.

In January, military operations were concentrated in the area between Piagapo and Balindong towns in Lanao. The firefight involved about eight ISIS-Maute members, of which one was killed. Piagapo, Balindong, and Tugaya, which is contiguous to both towns, also saw clashes in September 2019. ISIS-Maute fighters were also sighted in Tubaran and Marogong towns. They were also spotted here in previous months, as well as in Lumbatan and Lumbaca-Unayan. These are contiguous towns located south of Lake Lanao. The ISIS-Maute, splintered into groups but actively recruiting, were said to be rearming and collecting more weapons.



A residence gate is marked after the military has inspected and cleared the building as free from ISIS fighters at the height of the Marawi siege.

Photo by Ana Puod/Digital 8

Despite the surrenders, the towns comprising the 'SPMS Box' in Maguindanao will continue to be a tinderbox due to the presence of the BIFF.

In Maguindanao, meanwhile, 12 members of the BIFF surrendered to the Sultan Sa Barongis local government and the military. (Another four from Gen. SK Pendatun town also surrendered in January).¹¹ Sultan Sa Barongis, which flanks Liguasan March on the Maguindanao side, has been known for being the lair of Abu Toraife-led BIFF that has forged links with ISIS. The surrenders transpired amid intense military operations, offers of assistance from the Bangsamoro transition government, and as residents cooperated with the military by providing reports on BIFF fighters' whereabouts. Despite the surrenders, the towns comprising the 'SPMS Box' in Maguindanao will continue to be a tinderbox due to the presence of the BIFF.

The clashes in Lanao and Maguindanao in 2019 displaced over 1,000 families and around 7,500 individuals.

Implications

With the security situation growing more complex by the day, a reexamination of the measures articulated in Proclamation No. 55 needs to be done.

Under Proclamation No. 55, the military and police were ordered to heighten their visibility, intensify their intelligence gathering, and apprehend those who conspire to commit or are committing lawless violence. At checkpoints, they can ask motorists to roll down their vehicle windows, check things in plain sight, or request identification or registration papers. They can't make warrantless arrests unless the situation allows it.¹²

Because it was issued in 2016 when circumstances were different, the government's announcement that Proclamation No. 55 is still in effect was met with confusion, particularly among residents of Muslim Mindanao, who are expected to benefit most from its implementation.¹³ Among their questions: will there be curfews still? will checkpoints remain? what are the limits of Proclamation No. 55? And very important: how will it address criminality and terrorism, and improve security?

Challenges to the region's security are not new. For residents who constantly live in conflict, the aspiration is to simply live in peace.

¹¹ E. Fernandez, Inquirer.net, 16 'tired' BIFF members surrender to Army in Maguindanao, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1219787/16-tired-biff-members-surrender-to-army-in-maguindanao> (accessed 26 February 2020).

¹² Office of the President of the Philippines, Memorandum Order No.3, s. 2016, *Providing guidelines for the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police in the implementations of measures to suppress and prevent lawless violence*, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2016/09/07/memorandum-order-no-3-s-2016/> (accessed 26

¹³ Proclamation No. 55 was predicated on Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group terror attacks, including the bombing of Davao City's night market on 2 September 2016.

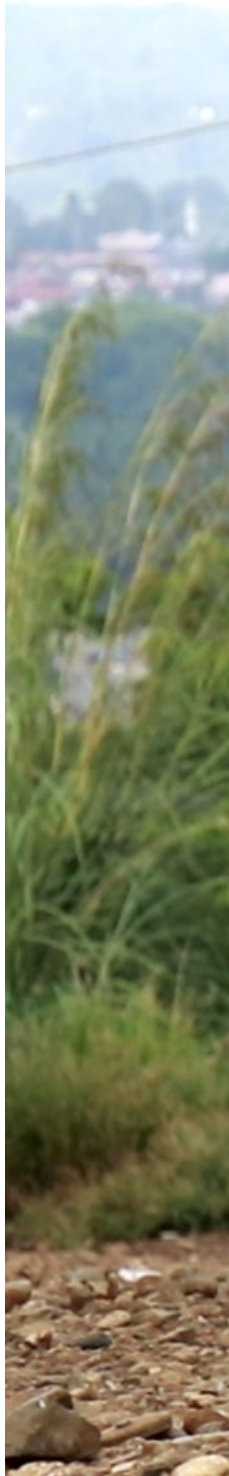


When the iron-fist approach proves inadequate or ineffective, the security sector can look at alternative ways to achieve the desired outcomes. For one, they can strengthen relations with residents of barangays and towns they're assigned in order to get their cooperation. These residents can help with law enforcement, such as in the interdiction of illegal drugs and weapons, in warning against the eruption of violence stemming from clan feuding, or in providing information about the movement of extremists. The military has worked closely with communities. But the police, as observed, needs to engage in more dialogues with residents to gain their trust.

Local governments also have a role to play. On the issue of loose and illegal weapons, they can issue local laws banning firearms in public. The Davao City government has done so. The Lanao del Sur provincial government is contemplating incentives for those who will voluntarily surrender their firearms. Local governments can also put themselves at the forefront of peacebuilding by supporting or strengthening conflict mediation and resolution and in directing development-oriented programs and projects to poor barangays and towns. These will help interrupt the strings of violence from rido and provide alternatives to residents who rely on the shadow economy, particularly illegal drugs, in sustaining their daily living.

Tracking of events that will impact the security of their respective localities should be imperative for local governments so they can anticipate and prepare for future events. (This bulletin will come in handy). These include the ambush incidents and killings that threaten to escalate into rido; the reinvigorated illegal drug trade, particularly in Marawi; clashes between government troops and extremists that can result in displacement of families; the pace of Marawi's reconstruction and a new military camp, which can incite public protests; and land-related conflicts within Marawi's destroyed core as some families manage to return to rebuild their homes. These will require close coordination with the military and police, and the activation of community assistance and conflict mediation bodies, particularly on the issue of land.

Other events are regional in scope but can have local impact, such as the decommissioning of members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front fighters and the ongoing transition to the Bangsamoro, including the turnover of Cotabato City to the autonomous region. Authorities must ensure they are done correctly, by say, securing the surrendered weapons and preventing their leakage to the grey market; agreeing on a timeline for the turnover of Cotabato to the Bangsamoro autonomous region; and ensuring that projects and programs are equitably targeted or distributed among Bangsamoro residents.





Internally displaced children play with dirt in an evacuation center in Marawi City.

*Photo by Maureen Lacuesta/
International Alert Philippines*

A national health issue such as the COVID-19 infection, of which the first case in the Philippines was confirmed in January, ought to trigger preparations by local governments to inform residents about the disease and to ensure that local health facilities have the capacity to deal with it.

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The intersection between shadow economy and violent extremism

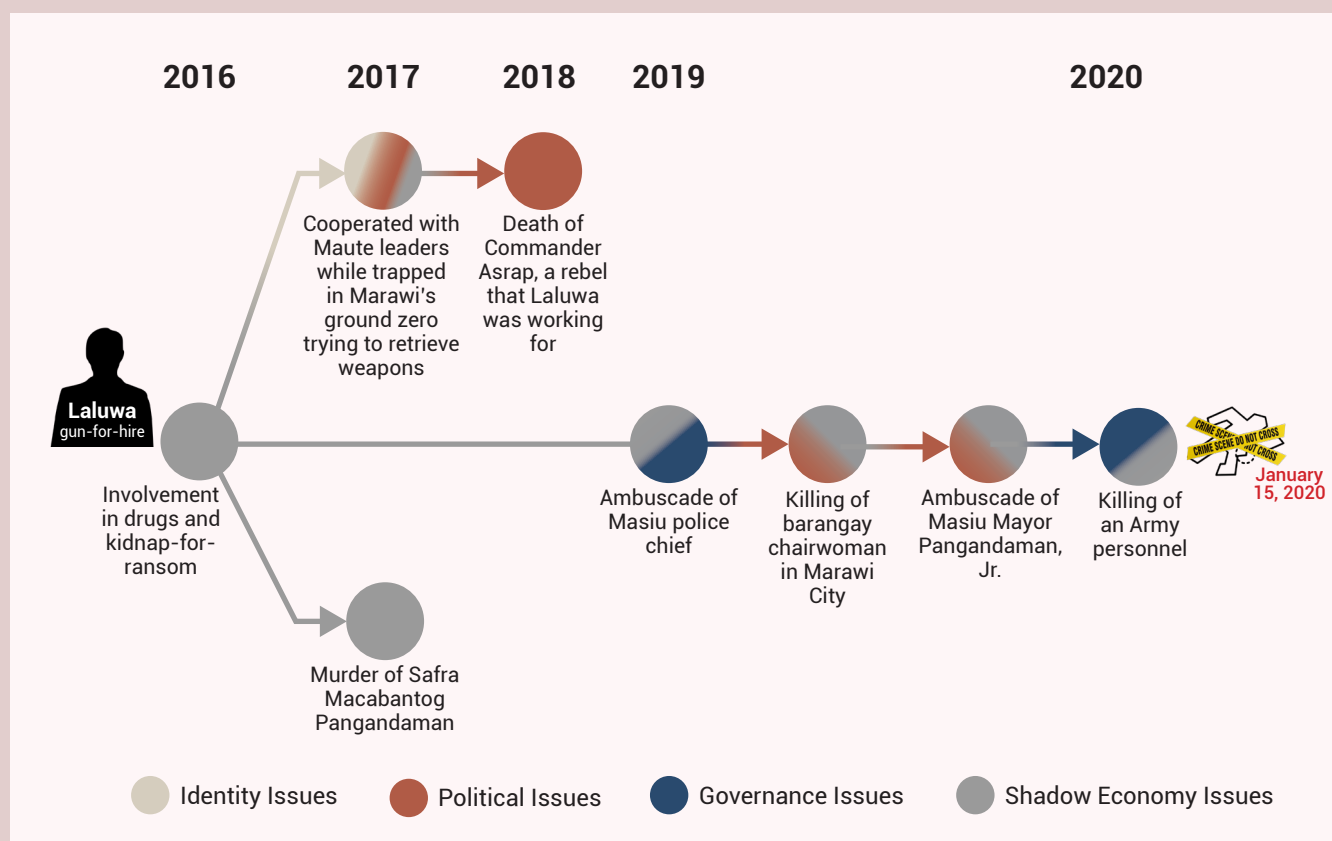
The police operation in the early hours of 15 January 2020 in Brgy. Pagalamatan of Saguilaran town in Lanao del Sur was hardly routine. The arresting team was composed of regional, police, municipal and Marawi City police forces, and their target was 'Laluwa', suspect of killings and assassinations in Lanao del Sur. When it was over, Laluwa and a companion were dead. The two had allegedly fired at the police even before their warrant could be served, igniting a firefight the two did not win.

Laluwa was Jalaloding Mocsir, notorious for his involvement in drugs, kidnap-for-ransom, and assassinations and for his

links to the Maute Group. He exemplified the individual who straddled the criminal shadow economy and violent extremism, complicating and frustrating efforts by government, nongovernment groups and the security sector to address these issues.

His beginnings are traced to a Moro rebel, who also dabbled in kidnap-for-ransom and other shadow enterprises. He worked for this rebel as a gun-for-hire and eventually went on his own when this person was killed in 2018.

News reports linked Laluwa to the Maute Group through Osoph Hadji Nasif, also known as Commander Asrap. Other accounts told of how he was trapped inside Marawi's ground zero



at the height of the war while trying to retrieve weapons left behind by his master, the Moro rebel, who had metamorphosed into a barangay official by that time. He cooperated with the Maute leaders until he was able to get out of the area.

Laluwa's links to the Maute Group burnished his reputation. He sold his skills to those who wanted to take revenge for perceived slights and offenses done against them. He was said to be behind the killing of a barangay chairwoman and a soldier in Marawi, and the attempt on the life of the Masiu police chief in Marawi and of Masiu Mayor Nasser Pangandaman Jr. in Buadiposo-Buntong municipality. These four incidents took place in 2019, when martial law was still in effect, demonstrating his audacity despite heavy military and police presence in the city.

Before the police operation in January, Laluwa was seen openly going about in Marawi and Marantao. The police took the chance to arrest him for the murder of a certain Safra Macabantog Pangandaman in Marawi City in 2017.

Laluwa's death is expected to lead to less targeted killings in the province. A feared and charismatic leader, his killing is believed to have neutralized the hired guns working for him. It has not assuaged, however, the fury of families and clans whose relatives he had killed or hurt; they knew he was hired by others and plan to take revenge.

International Alert's Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) is an SMS- and high frequency radio-based reporting system that captures conflict incidents and tensions in communities. It is used by the Early Response Network (ERN), a group of men and women in various localities in the Bangsamoro, who share real-time information and work with local governments, key agencies, the security sector, and religious and traditional leaders in coordinating quick and context-specific responses to tensions, violent conflicts, disasters, and displacement, as they happen. Command posts are led by our local partners TASBIKka, Inc., ERN Lanao del Sur, MARADECA, Inc., and Lupah Sug Bangsamoro Women Association, Inc.



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