

Scorching heat and surging violence leave trails of death and displacement in mainland Mindanao

CRITICAL EVENTS MONITORING SYSTEM (CEMS)-
EARLY RESPONSE NETWORK (ERN) BULLETIN

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An armed confrontation between members of MILF groups resulted in mass displacement of residents in Brgy. Pembalkan, Mamasapano in April 2024.
Photo courtesy of ERN Sultan sa Barongis

Scorching heat and a surge in violence since the start of the year has triggered an unprecedented rise in deaths and displacement in the Bangsamoro region as it heads towards regional elections in 2025. A state of calamity has been declared as temperatures rise of around 40 degrees Celsius across the region, compounding tensions from intensifying horizontal conflict.

Intra-group violence gets out of control

Much of the violence arose from intra-armed group clashes that primarily involved various Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) commanders and combatants. Reports from CCAA's Critical Events Monitoring Systems (CEMS) show that most of the violence was fueled by resource competition, clan rivalries, and shifting political alliances.

Twenty (20) violent clashes from January to April 2024 were reported in the municipalities of Sultan sa Barongis, Shariff Saydona Mustapha, Mamasapano, Talitay, and South Upi in Maguindanao del Sur and in Pigcawayan and Midsayap in the special geographic areas (SGA) that recently joined the Bangsamoro Autonomous

Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). These were mostly due to a combination of political, identity and resource-related issues.

In the last two weeks of April (18-30) 2024 alone, more than eight firefights and ambushes erupted primarily involving MILF commanders, leaving 14 dead, and close to 5,400 families displaced. Forced evacuations have risen to around ten thousand since then, highlighting the enduring insecurity and instability in a region that is supposed to be transitioning to peace.

The infighting between and among MILF members and their commanders is no secret to local governments and state security forces particularly in the Maguindanao and Lanao provinces. However, these internal conflicts are the worst recorded since the formation of the new regional authority in 2019.

The violence and the human cost are so alarming that many religious leaders, both Christian and Muslim, and private sector groups, including non-government and civil society organizations have called on the MILF leadership to discipline their troops. Yet a major firefight between MILF-affiliated groups in Maguindanao, particularly in Tukanalipao, Mamasapano rages on with no end in sight.



Residents flee their homes during an armed conflict that erupted between two MILF commands in Brgy. Ganta, Shariff Saydona Mustapha, Maguindanao del Sur on 30 March 2024. Clashes involving MILF members have been erupting in many places in Maguindanao del Sur province since the start of the year. **Photo courtesy of ERN Sultan sa Barongis.**

¹ A majority of voters said "yes" to the ratification of the creation of the new municipalities in the special geographic areas of the BARMM on April 13.

Violent clashes continue in Shariff Saydona, South Upi, Sultan sa Barongis, Pigcawayan, and Datu Odin Sinsuat.

The spike in violence cast a shadow in what was otherwise a successful, peaceful, and orderly plebiscite of the 63 barangays in the SGAs in the same month.¹

Pre-election related violence

Violence ran parallel with the preparations for the first Bangsamoro parliamentary elections, scheduled for May next year. A coalition has been forged by various political parties which includes five governors of the Bangsamoro region and other traditional political elites. The new alliance poses the first direct challenge to the MILF's control over the BARMM and the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA).

The municipality of Datu Odin Sinsuat in Maguindanao Sur is considered a prime political hotspot due to the feud between families who are aligned with opposing political parties in the province. More than 2,000 families were affected by recurring fighting across its barangays in March 2024 that stemmed from the 2022 mayoral elections and the succeeding 2023 barangay elections. Fighting persisted throughout the month.

Meanwhile, post-election violence from the 2023 barangay elections continued in parts of Lanao del Sur and are likely to spill over into the 2025 elections. In Picong town, clan feuding in relation to the October 2023 Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan elections was triggered when a supporter of a losing candidate for barangay chairman attacked the residence of the elected barangay chairman on March 11. Violence between the two groups would recur until the end of April. In Malabang, a known supporter of a winning barangay candidate was shot dead, causing people to evacuate after a series of revenge killings.

There were also armed confrontations involving the clan of a barangay chairman in Maguindanao del Norte and the gunning down of a barangay councilor and the killing of a barangay secretary, both in Maguindanao del Sur. In Pigcawayan, a

recurring firefight between an incumbent and former barangay chairman, both affiliated with the MILF, occurred just a few days after the SGA plebiscite, causing widespread displacement.

Violent extremists go head to head with the military

Retaliatory fighting between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) on the one hand, and violent extremist groups Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and Dawla Islamiyah (DI) on the other, added to the insecurity in communities already suffering from extreme temperatures and drought.

Early 2024 saw the intensification of military operations against those behind the bombing of Mindanao State University in Marawi City in December 2023. The military killed nine DI members who were allegedly involved in the explosion. By February 12, the military announced the killing of the DI-Maute Group (MG) commander and mastermind of the bombing, Khadafi Mimbasa alias Engineer.² According to the AFP, his death put the DI-MG on the brink of collapse.

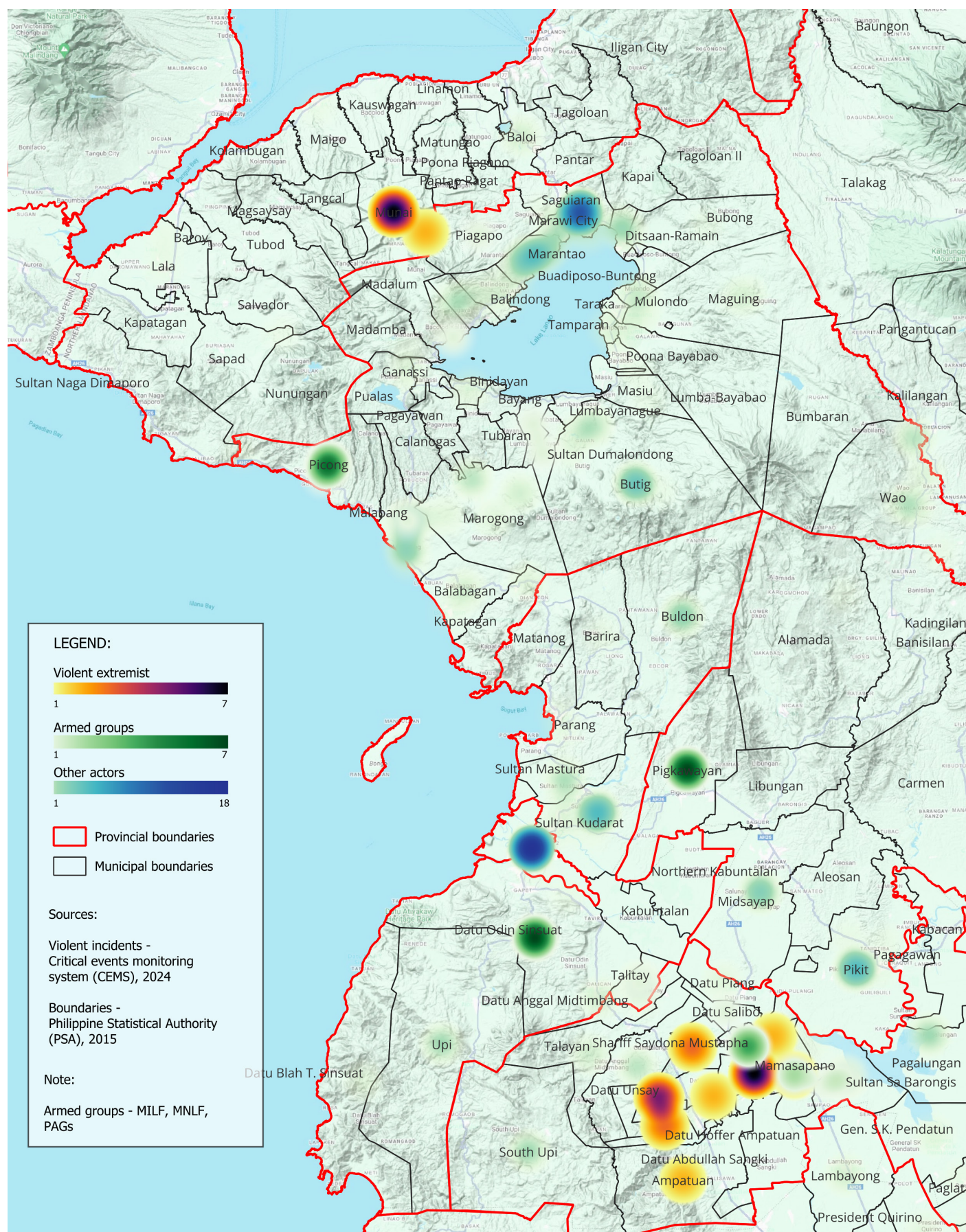
Yet the DI was able to retaliate by ambushing pursuing soldiers in Munai town, Lanao del Norte six days later. The military countered with a tightening of security at the border of Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte and engaging DI in a running gun battle.

Armed clashes in areas adjacent to Munai would go on until the end of April, when a parallel attack by the military against the BIFF in Maguindanao del Sur led to the killing of BIFF leader Kagui Karianan and 11 other members. Karianan was cornered by intensified military operations in Datu Saudi Ampatuan town, Maguindanao del Sur.

There are reports that the death of Karianan was directly caused by violent intra-clan and ethnic rivalries that made his group vulnerable. Clan alliances are constantly shifting, and clan rivalries are difficult to extinguish permanently. CEMS' sources revealed that Karianan's death exposed cracks in kinship ties within the MILF that led to his eventual demise.

² MSU bombing 'brains' killed in encounter—AFP. Inquirer. 13 February 2024. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1903260/msu-bombing-brains-killed-in-encounter-afp>

Violent conflict incidents in mainland Bangsamoro, January-April 2024



Map produced by Council for Climate and Conflict Action Asia. May 2024.

The remaining followers of Karialan were reported to have divided into three groups. Some allegedly joined the MILF 118th Base Command. A second group were said to have hired out themselves with local politicians for the 2025 elections. The other remnants reportedly joined the BIFF faction headed by Commander Bongos.

The collateral deaths of civilians, including minors, during the military offensive against Karialan would further cause the death of four soldiers from revenge killings in Datu Hoffer Ampatuan town. The fighting has spilled over to neighboring indigenous peoples' municipalities, causing the displacement of Teduray-Lambangian tribes.

A series of clashes between the military and the BIFF and DI across the mainland provinces of the Bangsamoro would produce another 40 deaths by the end of April 2024.

Finally, violent incidents involving suspected drug personalities occurred in the first quarter of 2024, with 18 killed and nine injured in shooting incidents and firefights between the authorities and suspects. The bloodiest event occurred on March 10 in Midsayap town, Cotabato, when a firefight erupted as soldiers were about to serve an arrest warrant to an MILF commander suspected of involvement in the illegal drug trade.

Authorities were also busy conducting at least 26 drug buy-bust operations and two entrapment operations from February to April across the cities and provinces of BARMM, arresting at least 49 individuals and confiscating no less than 64.7 million pesos worth of illegal drugs.

Lastly, new evidence has revealed the rapid revival of the illegal drug economies in the mainland Bangsamoro provinces and the robust links between illicit drugs and violent extremism. In Datu Odin

Sinsuat, Maguindanao del Sur, authorities arrested two large distributors of crystal meth who confessed their close financial ties with Kagi Karialan and other DI groups.

Conclusion

The surge in violence in the first half of 2024 marks the worst case of intra-group conflicts involving the MILF since the passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law in 2019. It lays bare the failure to achieve genuine normalization, particularly in the decommissioning of weapons and the demobilization of combatants. It exposes the inability of both the Philippine government and the MILF to reinforce the terms of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro and to discipline the latter's combatants.

Amid the failure of the normalization project is the abject defeat of the Duterte government's war on drugs too. The quick restoration of the illicit drug industry was marked by the return of the BARMM-based drug lords and their enterprises in 2023 and the rechanneled flow of drug money into extremist violence and electoral contestation. Clear evidence of the links between the shadow economy of drugs and violent extremism were featured in many arrests and clashes in the first half of 2024.

Finally, violent extremism continues to gain new adherents in their long-established bases in the Bangsamoro. VE groups are busy hiring out their skills and services to politicians in the run-up to the 2025 elections. Fake reports about defeating ISIS has become a painful spoof exposed by the resilience of the BIFF, DI, and other armed groups who have retained their presence and operations in the same hotspots of 2017—places such as Butig and Marawi, Mamasapano and Cotabato. ●

The Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) is an SMS- and high frequency radio-based reporting system that captures conflict incidents and tensions in communities in real-time. It is used by the Early Response Network (ERN), an independent 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. The CEMS is now managed by the Council for Climate and Conflict Action Asia (formerly International Alert Philippines), a local organization focused on understanding the drivers of conflict and its interaction with climate risks for policy formulation, community strategies, and peacebuilding.

