



POLLS and PERILS: Fault lines and flood lines are rising as new perils overtake the polls

Statement of Climate Conflict Action Asia and the Early Response Network on the massive flooding and displacement in Maguindanao del Sur
22 May 2025

The mid-term elections that brought violence, intimidation, and militarization in hotspots like Maguindanao and Lanao has ended. As in the past, local communities showed remarkable courage—braving threats and enduring long hours of waiting just to cast their vote and make their voices heard on election day.

A fragile peace has been restored that may not last long. Scores that need to be settled have given way to a new inflection point brought about by rising waters and the lack of urgent protection and immediate relief.

The onslaught of heavy rains caused by a tropical storm did not cool the tensions and fears that attended the recent elections; instead, it submerged low-lying areas of Maguindanao del Sur and adjacent provinces in the past days, extending the uncertainty and insecurity in a place that a week earlier had seen the most violent elections in the region.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) reported that 192,000 people or 38,689 families have been affected as of May 20, 2025, with at least 890 individuals or 178 families sheltered in evacuation centers while 191,115 persons or 38,511 families have sought refuge in other locations.

Climate Conflict Action sounds the alarm on another emergency and the very real threat of a full-blown humanitarian crisis unfolding in several municipalities of flood-stricken Mindanao—areas reeling from horizontal conflicts in the aftermath of the elections. The convergence of political conflicts and its disaster-related impact demands urgent and coordinated action from local governments, the BARMM and the national government to prevent a dangerous tipping point that would further destabilize an already volatile region.

Now there's the rub. There are serious doubts about the capacity of the local and regional government to respond. Basic services are stretched to their limits

and local governments await much needed financial support, funds that communities fear may have already been diverted for the midterm elections or earmarked for the upcoming parliamentary polls.

As floodwaters rise and spill over to other parts of Mindanao, so will the possibility of various conflicts and tensions crossing over—a prime example of how climate shocks such as flooding or drought intersect with fissures and fault lines that destabilize communities already on edge.

The towns of Datu Abdullah Sangki, Shariff Aguak, Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Ampatuan, Shariff Saydona Mustapha, Datu Hoffer Ampatuan, Mamasapano, Datu Piang, Sultan sa Barongis, Datu Salibo, Guindulungan, and Datu Anggal Midtimbang were the worst impacted. These areas are already burdened by a long history of violence and the presence of different armed groups. ***The convergence of vulnerability and volatility makes the current situation particularly perilous and threatens to spread to other areas.*** New reports have now shown that the same destructive flooding has spread to Zamboanga del Sur.

Election-era flashpoints rekindled by flooding

In many of the same barangays, the midterm elections saw political rivalries flare into violence precisely where the recent flooding forced neighbors into cramped evacuation centers. Displaced families from flood-prone villages—long accustomed to moving with the high waters—found political cleavages running deeper than the flood lines. Competing clans and political affiliations revived old feuds, sparking skirmishes that mirrored the horizontal violence CCAA tracked during the election period.

Humanitarian response meets political rivalry

With relief operations now underway, evacuees depend on local officials for food, shelter, and medicines. Yet in this charged post-election atmosphere, communities fear that outgoing incumbents may redirect aid to their own supporters, while newly elected leaders could punish villages that voted “wrong.” Delays in response or the release of calamity funds risk amplifying mistrust—and could well tip election-period tensions and push already volatile communities toward another cycle of conflict and loss.

Submerged marshlands create ‘highways’ for illicit activities to thrive and facilitate mobility of armed groups to settle scores

As waters swell across the Liguasan Marsh, traditional security checkpoints along main roads lose their effectiveness. Illicit groups are able to exploit the inundated marsh to move drugs, arms, and people by boat, bypassing security posts entirely. New “back routes” of submerged tracks eased mobility across

flood-affected areas, creating discreet entry and exit points that allow warring clans to reinforce strategic positions undetected, further undermining the rule of law in already weaponized areas.

Economic dislocation and recruitment pressures

Flood-ravaged rice paddies, cornfields, and fishponds have stripped many families of their livelihoods overnight. In Datu Abdullah Sangki alone, hectares of corn and rice fields lie ruined, while traditional fishing grounds are under muddy water. Lacking alternative incomes, some displaced youth and adults—especially in municipalities where armed groups pay stipends—hire their labor out to illicit and mercenary groups, paramilitary armies, or worse—to violent extremist groups still present in the area.

Community solidarity amid crisis

But as floodwaters rose and socio-economic pressures intensified, we also found glimmers of hope and resilience, revealing that the spirit of cooperation and the strength of collective action have not been dampened. In worst-hit neighborhoods, rival families pooled their labor to clear canals and construct makeshift drainage channels. Buckets passed among and between households, reflecting the communal wisdom that working together can enable villages to deter floodwaters from causing more destruction and death. Such cooperation, if nurtured, could form the basis for longer-term reconciliation efforts once the waters subside.

How Maguindanao del Sur weathers this dual challenge of climate disaster and post-election violence will be the litmus test for BARMM's institutions and the peace process they uphold. Whether BARMM emerges from this more stable or more fractured is determined by what and how effective its actions are and how quickly and fairly it is able to deploy it. Its actions now will shape how people express or withhold their trust in the Bangsamoro government—at the ballot box in the upcoming parliamentary elections in October.

Call to action

This is a critical window for leadership and accountability—one that demands swift, principled, and inclusive action. **We therefore call on the BARMM government and its partners to:**

1) Ensure equitable and conflict-sensitive distribution of aid and relief

Relief must reach all affected families, irrespective of political affiliation, to defuse election-related grievances. Transparent beneficiary lists, involvement of grassroots monitors and joint civil-military oversight can de-escalate local tensions and reduce the risk of exclusionary actions.

2) Immediate release of calamity funds

Mobilize the five (5)% municipal calamity fund without delay and unlock BARMM READi and Project Tabang resources for urgent deployment. At the barangay level, prioritize the release of the Quick Response Funds (QRF) for immediate assistance ahead of the longer bureaucratic process of accessing the calamity fund at the municipal level.

3) Strengthen community-based early response

Engage local leaders, barangay responders, youth and women to monitor both rising floodwaters and conflict flashpoints in real time. Initiatives like the Critical Events Monitoring System-Early Response Network (CEMS-ERN) can bridge humanitarian and peace and security actors, ensuring that disaster response and conflict prevention proceed in tandem.

4) Activate flood preparedness in adjacent towns

Preposition relief stocks and coordinate evacuation protocols in surrounding municipalities that are equally vulnerable to rising floodwaters—especially the Special Geographic Areas (SGAs)—before the next downpour, some still lack provincial support structures and thus require immediate assistance and attention from the BARMM regional government. Streamline inter-agency coordination to ensure that bureaucratic bottlenecks do not impede life-saving assistance.

Only by integrating climate resilience and conflict management will the region be able to prevent turning the disaster that devastated huge parts of Maguindanao del Sur into yet another catalyst for violence. BARMM must act swiftly, fairly, and at scale that responds to the dire situation communities face. The credibility of institutions and their leaders, and the future of peace itself, will be measured by decisive action, not the empty weight of rhetoric.

##end##

For inquiries and interviews, please contact:

Louise Marie Lara
Communications Manager
Climate Conflict Action
09178816238
llara@conflictaction.org

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 Climate Conflict Action (CCAA, 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.