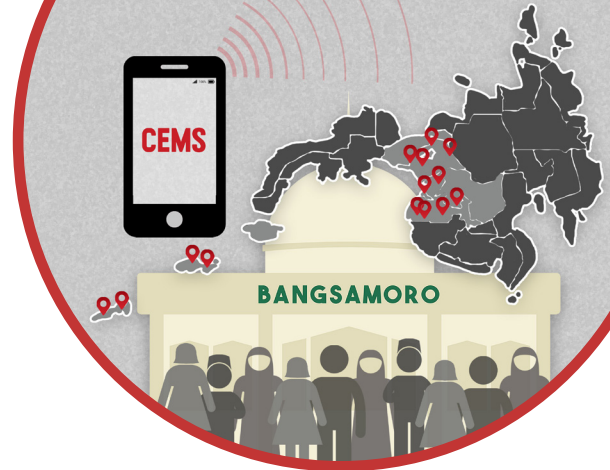


# CRITICAL EVENTS MONITORING SYSTEM BULLETIN

Period covered: September 2019

Date of release: 18 November 2019



## A worrying turn of events in Lanao del Sur

Military shelling of an ISIS camp roused Piagapo before sunrise while the killing of a sultan primed Malabang for the resumption of a clan feud. They took place kilometers and days apart, with no seeming connection, except they marked an escalation in violence in war-weary Lanao del Sur.

These alarming developments did not happen out of the blue. Reports filed by Early Response Network (ERN) members in Lanao del Sur in previous months warned of the Maute-ISIS's regrouping, pointed out sightings of members even in battle-scarred Marawi City, and recounted clashes between the military and Maute-ISIS fighters.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, fighting between parties engaged in *rido*—or inter- and intra-clan feuds—erupted in various locations in the province, triggered in many instances by election-related issues.<sup>2</sup>

### The impact of martial law

Lanao del Sur experienced a period of peace after the 2017 war in Marawi and the imposition of martial law, according to data from Conflict Alert.<sup>3</sup> The number of violent conflicts plunged to 373 in 2018 from 914 in 2017, as the Marawi conflict subsided, together with the number of extremist incidents and gun-related crimes such as shootings and murders. The number of incidents registered at 514 in 2016.

However, incidents related to clan feuding began to rise, reaching 39 in 2018 from the 32 incidents in 2017 and 24 in 2016. In Lanao del Sur, *rido* persist due to politics, land disputes, pride or *maratabat*, retaliation, accidents, and illicit drugs.<sup>4</sup> National and local elections were held in 2016 and barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan elections in 2018.

<sup>1</sup> ERN members based in Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao provide the reports for the Critical Events Monitoring System. These reports are transmitted through SMS, stored in a database, and processed for deployment of context-specific responses by key stakeholders on the ground. Around 200 ERN reports in September were used for the writing 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.

<sup>2</sup> F. J. Lara Jr., *Insurgents, Clans, and States: Political Legitimacy and Resurgent Conflict in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2014, page 89.

<sup>3</sup> International Alert Philippines, *Conflict Alert 2019: War Makes States*, Quezon City: International Alert Philippines, 2019, page 68, <http://conflicalert.info/publication/war-makes-states/>

<sup>4</sup> M. I. Matuan, *Inventory of Existing Rido in Lanao del Sur (1994-2004)*, in W.M. Torres III (ed.), *Rido: Clan Feuding and Clan Conflict in Mindanao*, Makati City: The Asia Foundation, 2007, page 79.

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## Resurgent extremism

Data from the Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) showed a resurgence in extremist violence incidents this year.

Clashes with violent extremists took place in the area between Marogong and Sultan Dumalondong in January 2019. The militants were led by Abu Dar, who was said to have taken over the reins of the Maute group after the death of its leaders. Casualties numbered 14 on the side of the militants and 15 on the side of the military.

Another clash took place in March in the area between Tubaran and Pagayawan. In this incident, Abu Dar and his close aide Abu Jihad were killed. Subsequent military operations fanned out to other areas between the towns of Lumbaca-Unayan and Lumbatan where armed extremist groups were sighted.

The military hoped that the death of Abu Dar would finally neutralize the remaining members of the Maute group.<sup>5</sup> But the group had reportedly splintered and recent reports indicated the presence of new recruits among the subgroups. These subgroups were monitored in the towns of Marantao, Marogong, Marawi, Lumbatan, and Tubaran from January to June.

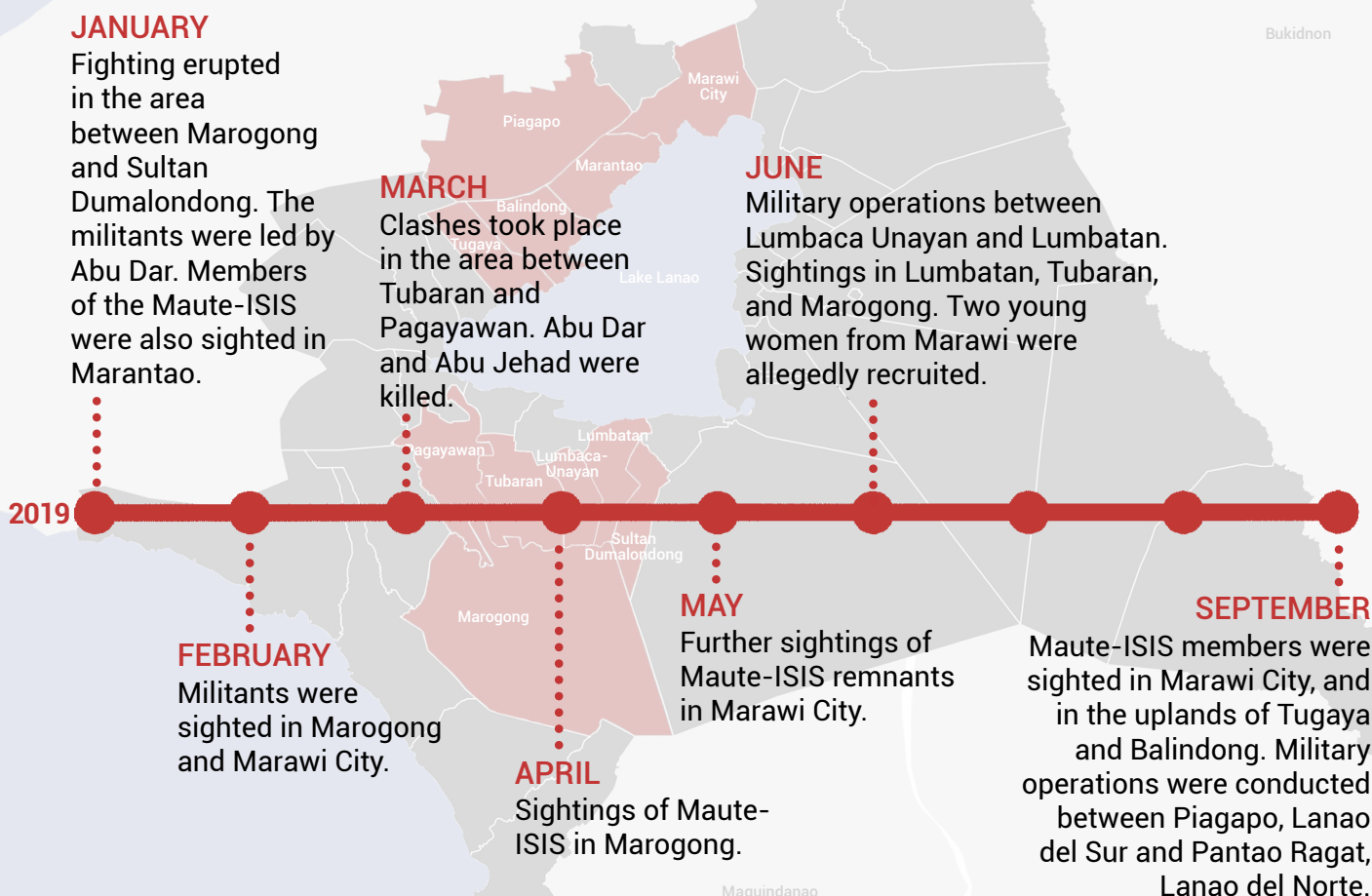
September began ominously. Early that month, Maute-ISIS members were seen riding a multicab (small truck) in the vicinity of the Marawi City Hall, surprising residents who recognized some extremists who they thought had died during the war in 2017. By the middle of September, the military was spotted in the uplands of Tugaya and Balindong, conducting operations against Maute-ISIS.

<sup>5</sup> ABS-CBN News, *DNA test confirms death of Marawi Siege leader Abu Dar*, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/04/14/19/dna-test-confirms-death-of-marawi-siege-leader-abu-dar> (accessed 21 October 2019).

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## Timeline of Maute-ISIS events reported in CEMS





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Internally displaced persons struggle to collect clean water in Sarimanok Tent City, Marawi City.

Photo by Maureen Lacuesta/  
International Alert Philippines

Tugaya and Balindong share a boundary with the town of Piagapo, which later came under bombardment. On 18 September, between 3 and 4 a.m., the military fired artillery at an area between Piagapo, Lanao del Sur and Pantao Ragat, Lanao del Norte. The target was a group of around 30 men, said to be Maute-ISIS. The military later stormed the site and detained three young men who were suspected of being Maute-ISIS members and were in the process of hiding their guns when apprehended.

The deafening artillery blasts blanketed the towns of Piagapo and nearby Marawi, waking residents and causing fear. Displaced families who lived through the terror of 2017 and who still lived in temporary shelters and evacuation camps in Marawi panicked.

Piagapo had been strategic to the Maute Group and its allies. The armed group had established a training camp in the town in 2016, located about 20 kilometers from Marawi.<sup>6</sup> The camp was overrun after a three-day battle in April 2017, or a month before the siege of Marawi began.<sup>7</sup> The town remains strategic due to its proximity to the Islamic city.

Residents of Marawi reported that an important issue that has been tapped by the violent extremists to radicalize and recruit is the slow

pace of rehabilitation of the 24 barangays comprising Marawi's heavily destroyed areas. This has been instrumentalized by remnants of Maute-ISIS to recruit new members. More than 66,000 people have remained displaced, either staying with families, or in evacuation camps or temporary shelters.<sup>8</sup> Meeting their daily needs is a daily problem.

### Spate of clan feuding

CEMS data also indicated an increase in family or clan feuding and political violence connected to the 2019 mid-term elections. There were at least 17 incidents of violent feuding from January to August, triggered in most instances by politics, land-related conflicts, and family issues such as dowry.

<sup>6</sup> C. Yabes, *Factors and forces that led to the Marawi debacle*, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/spotlight/10/20/19/factors-and-forces-that-led-to-the-marawi-debacle>

<sup>7</sup> CNN Philippines, *37 members of Maute, Jemaah Islamiyah, killed in Lanao clashes – military*, <https://cnnphilippines.com/regional/2017/04/25/maute-jemaah-islamiyah-killed-lanao-clashes.html> (accessed 21 October 2019).

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Philippines: Situation Report*, 29 July 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Philippines%20-%202029%20Jul%202019.pdf>, page 6, accessed 21 October 2019.

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In September, the killing of Aksara M. Balindong, chairman of Brgy. Campo Muslim and 'Sultan a Dimasangkay sa Picong', shook Malabang. Reports said he was in the town center between 4 and 5 p.m. on 26 September when he was shot. Aksara was the most prominent member of the powerful Balindong clan based in Malabang and Picong who was killed because of *rido*. According to one version of events, he was allegedly killed to avenge the 2010 killing of two individuals that had been blamed on his clan.

Malabang's residents fret that the absence of a determined government response or intervention would spark revenge killings and turn Aksara Balindong's death into a bigger and wider conflict that could throw Malabang into chaos.

There were other incidents in September that were due to *rido*, e.g., the shooting death of a former Marawi barangay chairman and armed clashes in Calanogas between the family of a sultan and the family of his former daughter-in-law that stemmed from the failure to return part of a dowry after the young couple separated.

There were other distinct events that could spawn clan and other types of violence in the second half of 2019.

For example, the 1 August-30 September voter registration for the barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan elections slated on 11 May 2020 ignited conflicts among those intending to run and their supporters. In one town, a prospective candidate for barangay chairman was shot and killed. At the registration center of the Commission on Elections (Comelec) in the same town, supporters of an incumbent barangay chairwoman stopped those of a future rival from registering by tearing up their forms. This resulted in a scuffle. Meanwhile, supporters of a barangay chairman protested the Comelec's move to allow people who were allegedly not village residents to enlist.

Another deadly incident was provoked by the arrest and detention of two young men by the Marawi City police for throwing garbage in undesignated places. The Marawi local government has begun to strictly implement an ordinance that covers this, as part of efforts to turn the city clean. The father of the two, who is a barangay chairman in Malabang,

stormed the Marawi City police station along with four members of the Citizen Armed Forces Geographical Unit (CAFGU) and demanded the immediate release of the two young men. The commotion they caused resulted in their detention as well. The chairman and his sons were released after a day, and the CAFGU members, after five days, after posting bail. But before he left the police station, the barangay chairman threatened reprisals against those who put him and his sons in jail.

### Transition tensions

The transition to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao is raising high expectations and fueling a scrum for resources, particularly among Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) members. In one town, many have gotten community tax certificates to be able to participate in a cooperative venture promised to them by higher-ups.

Meanwhile, the move to turn six MILF camps into "peaceful and productive communities", as part of the peace pact with the government, has sparked a dash among MILF members to secure a piece of land even in base camps.<sup>9</sup> In another town, MILF members constructed houses on land they did not own but encompassed by an MILF base command. (MILF camps may span several barangays, with camps blending into surrounding communities). Landowners were angered and tried to drive these MILF members away. Through negotiations spearheaded by third parties, some landowners agreed to give up a piece of their land in exchange for a hefty payment.

### Road widening, not clearing

Implementation of the road clearing program by local governments raised tempers among residents whose properties were affected. Some demanded compensation for stores, houses

<sup>9</sup> Executive Order No. 79, "Implementing the Annex on Normalization under the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro," <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2019/04apr/20190524-EO-79-RRD.pdf> (accessed 21 October 2019). The six camps are Bilal, Omar ibn al-Khattab, Rajamuda, Busrah Somiorang, Badre and Abubakar as-Siddique.



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Military personnel inspect vehicles entering Lanao del Sur at a checkpoint.

Photo by Maureen Lacuesta/  
International Alert Philippines

or other structures that were torn down. Others pointed out that those belonging to local officials' relatives were not touched. In a barangay in Lumbaca-Unayan, an electric post was felled, causing a blackout and angering residents. The Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) ordered local governments "...to reclaim public roads which are being used for private ends..." and warned it would file administrative cases against officials who would not comply.<sup>10</sup> However, the DILG did not issue implementing guidelines, which gave local governments free rein to instead implement a road widening program that did not compensate affected residents.

### Resilient issues

Lanao families continued to be affected by the Coco Rasuman pyramiding scam, seven years after it collapsed. In one town, for instance, relatives squabbled over earnings from a corn harvest that was given to a Coco Rasuman agent years ago. One of them took the cow of the other to force the payment of the amount he insisted was due him. A committee organized by the local government and composed of elders heard the two quarreling parties and then issued a decision. The one who took the cow would have to return it to the owner, who would also give a sum representing the proceeds from the sale of the corn.

The news that polio has returned to the country 19 years after it was eradicated has caused a health

scare, more so in Lanao del Sur, where the first case was confirmed. A team from the World Health Organization went to the province to investigate the patient's circumstances.

The displaced have continued to call attention to their situation and have asked for new tents to shield them from the rains and the construction of a proper and adequate drainage system that would prevent rainwater from flooding their areas. Others asked for necessities such as food and electricity. They also protested the looting of scrap metal from within the 24 barangays; they saw big trucks going inside the area at night and coming out fully loaded with the scrap.

### Implications on community security

The end of the Marawi siege in 2017 was accompanied by the collapse of the Maute Group and the weakening of alliances between rival extremist factions. The interdiction of illicit firearms in the many checkpoints and the anti-illegal gun campaigns under martial law enabled the government to hunt down the remaining members of the Maute Group.<sup>11</sup>

However, Lanao residents have experienced a less strict and looser implementation of the

<sup>10</sup> DILG, Memorandum Circular No. 2019-121, [https://www.dilg.gov.ph/PDF\\_File/issuances/memo\\_circulars/dilg-memocircular-2019729\\_2c2087a765.pdf](https://www.dilg.gov.ph/PDF_File/issuances/memo_circulars/dilg-memocircular-2019729_2c2087a765.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> International Alert Philippines, 2019, op. cit., page 3.

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campaign against illicit guns in recent months. To illustrate, inspections at checkpoints had become perfunctory and the inspectors had become less enthusiastic about searching for weapons.

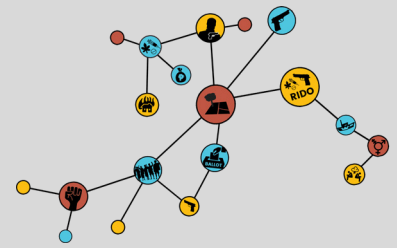
Meanwhile, the abject conditions in evacuation camps and the continued sight of a devastated city have not lessened the trauma of survivors, who have become economically worse off from the war. Add to these the restrictions against their early return to their homes and the fear about losing their properties and the situation becomes ripe for radicalization and recruitment.

Lanao's residents are no longer afraid to bring out their firearms in public, leading to the eruption of armed clashes between groups and gangs. The implication is stark and real—a different security approach is required that ensures that weapons are kept in check.

Analysis using the lens of conflict strings can help to come up with conflict prevention or mitigation measures. (See box).

## Cutting strings of conflict

Understanding how conflicts escalate provides a way to interrupt this process. The concept of conflict strings sees conflicts as multiplying from one episode to other episodes through modes such as revenge killings, as what happens during clan feuding.<sup>12</sup> The first episode may be due to a single cause or multiple causes, which can touch off other causes as the conflict worsens and spreads. Conflict actors can morph from victim to offender or vice versa. The type of conflict can shift from horizontal to vertical or vice versa.



A *rido* lends itself well to analysis using conflict strings. In the Aksara Balindong case, the gunman was believed to be related to the 2010 victims. Aksara's stature within the family could prompt retaliation from his clan.

In the case of land claimed by MILF members, the conflict with landowners unwilling to part with their properties could blow up into violent conflict such as *rido* if the situation could not be defused. The conflict could turn from horizontal, or between individuals, to vertical, or between rebels and the State, if the government's troops get involved.

Violent extremism has intersected with identity conflicts such as *rido*, shadow activities such as the illicit drug trade, and resource conflicts such as contestation over land. The Maute Group had been known to instrumentalize clan conflicts to gain alliances and firepower, and in the process, gained entry to illegal activities and cornered resources.<sup>13</sup>

Applying the concept of conflict strings is important to see violent incidents not as discrete incidents but part of (or can be part of) a string of incidents. It is equally important to understand the cause or causes of the violence and know who are involved to be able to craft the appropriate responses that can interrupt or cut the strings.

Succeeding bulletins will highlight conflict strings.

<sup>12</sup> N. D. Rosa, *Disrupting conflict strings in subnational contexts: Experience from Muslim Mindanao, Philippines*, Quezon City: International Alert Philippines, 2014, <http://conflictaalert.info/publication/disrupting-conflict-strings-sub-national-contexts-experience-muslim-mindanao-philippines/>

<sup>13</sup> International Alert Philippines, *Conflict Alert 2018: War and Identity*, Quezon City: International Alert Philippines, 2018, page 30, <http://conflictaalert.info/publication/war-and-identity/>

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.



**LUPAH SUG**  
Bangsamoro Women Association, Inc.