

Law enforcers conduct an investigation at the site of the bomb explosion in Mindanao State University gymnasium in Marawi City on 3 December 2023. Photo courtesy of Provincial Government of Lanao del Sur - Public Information Office.



Council for Climate and
Conflict Action Asia

No respite in violence in the Bangsamoro

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

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There has been no respite in violence in the Bangsamoro following the bloodiest elections recorded in the last decade during the October 2023 barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan elections.¹ Extremist violence and violent clan feuds would join election-related conflict as bombings, firefights, and targeted killings and ambushes escalate.

Enduring extremist violence

The most alarming incident following the October 2023 polls was the deadly explosion that ripped through a university gymnasium inside the Mindanao State University (MSU) during the First Day of Advent on December 3, 2023. An explosive device was detonated during a Catholic mass in Marawi City leaving four dead and 72 injured in the attack.

The government released a statement a few hours after the bombing pointing the finger on foreign terrorists.² Yet speculations about foreign extremist groups seemed odd since numerous reports prior to the incident indicated the enduring presence of a local Dawlah Islamiyah (DI) group in the area who could have launched the attack and given the distance between Marawi and places like Sulu or Zamboanga where foreign terrorists previously struck. A more credible explanation is the negligence and consequent inability of security forces to prepare and prevent such an attack—as they failed to sweep and secure the area before the regular Sunday mass—which they have often done in the past.

The military saw a different angle—insisting that revenge and retaliation were the more likely motives due to the series of successful military operations conducted against the terror group starting in November in the Lanao and Maguindanao provinces and the island of Basilan.



Disaster risk reduction and management officers respond to the bombing inside the Mindanao State University which left four dead and 72 injured. **Photo courtesy of ERN Marantao.**

The military intensified its operations against DI from November 27-29 with a series of bombing attacks targeting alleged DI camps in Marogong, and Butig, Lanao del Sur. On December 1, eleven members of DI were reportedly killed in a military offensive in Datu Hoffer Ampatuan, Maguindanao del Sur.³ On December 2, Abu Sayyaf Group leader Mundi Sawadjaan was also killed in an armed encounter with government troops in Basilan.⁴ These events provide the basis behind the claim that DI was digging in and pushing back, using the same tactics they had used in 2016 and 2017. The military continued with their offensive and on December 8 announced that they had arrested one of the suspects behind the explosion.⁵

A set of tit-for-tat clashes would follow. In Munai, Lanao del Norte, two soldiers were killed in an ambush incident on January 3, 2024. The victims were allegedly shot by six members of DI. Military and police forces continued to ramp up their operations in Lanao and on January 15, 2024,

¹ This year's barangay polls most violent since 2010. 12 November 2023. Inquirer. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1858436/this-years-bske-most-violent-village-elections-since-2010>

² Philippine president blames deadly Marawi bombing on 'foreign terrorists'. 03 December 2023. Benar News. <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/bomb-blast-12032023094023.html>

³ 11 Dawlah Islamiyah members killed in Maguindanao del Sur clash. 2 December 2023. GMA News. <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/regions/890207/11-dawlah-islamiyah-members-killed-in-maguindanao-del-sur-clash/story/>

⁴ Abu Sayyaf leader killed in Basilan clash. 3 December 2023. Rappler. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/mindanao/abu-sayyaf-leader-mudzrimar-sawadjaan-killed-basilan-clash-december-2023/>

⁵ However, many locals, including the Bangsamoro Human Rights Commission, cleared the alleged suspect because the person was not on the list of suspects identified earlier by the police and the Army. Rappler. 12 December 2023. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/mindanao/bangsamoro-human-rights-body-questions-arrest-suspect-jafar-gamo-sultan-msu-bombing-december-11-2023/>



Residents in Brgy. Dalgan, Pagalungan in Maguindanao del Sur continue with their daily activities in temporary shelters after being displaced due to armed conflict. **Photo courtesy of Pagalungan Local Government Unit.**

four company battalions of Special Action Forces were deployed in the province.⁶ Just a week after the deployment, nine suspected members of DI were killed while four soldiers wounded in a gunbattle in an upland village in Piagapo.⁷ A similar campaign against the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) was launched by the military in the areas surrounding the Liguasan Marsh. On December 7, the military conducted mortar shelling and airstrikes against ISIS-inspired groups in the boundaries of Pikit, Pagalungan, and Datu Montawal.

The offensives forced the BIFF to seek refuge in a Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) community in Brgy. Dalgan, Pagalungan. The BIFF was driven away by the MILF though they were able to kill a commander of the 108th MILF Base Command. The MILF would later join hands with the military to seek revenge. A firefight between the two groups would last for days, resulting in the death of 20 BIFF members and more than 5,000 civilians displaced.⁸

The MILF also intensified their operations against the DI and spread their operations to nearby Sultan sa Barongis on December 15, 2023. Residents immediately evacuated due to fear of being caught in the crossfire.

Election violence spills over

The 2023 village elections would bring horizontal violence beyond the election period with an escalation of clan feuding. Newly-elected barangay officials and those who just lost power and authority would be embroiled in shooting incidents, ambushes, and clashes.

At least seven newly-elected barangay and government officials were killed in the Bangsamoro from November 2023 to January 2024. These include three barangay councilors in North Cotabato, one in Cotabato City and another one in Sultan Mastura; a barangay chairman in Lumba Bayabao, Lanao del Sur; and a provincial

⁶ SAF commandos deployed to Lanao del Sur. 17 January 2024. Philippine Star. <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2024/01/17/2326413/saf-commandos-deployed-lanao-del-sur>

⁷ 9 suspected Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute group members killed in Lanao del Sur clash. 27 January 2024. ABS-CBN News. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/01/27/24/9-suspected-dawlah-islamiyah-maute-group-members-killed-in-lanao-del-sur>

⁸ Thousands flee as fighting erupts in Maguindanao del Sur. 13 December 2023. Inquirer. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1874476/thousands-flee-as-fighting-erupts-in-maguindanao-sur>

board member in Basilan. In Pikit, a barangay captain survived an ambush on December 23 due to a rido, while a barangay councilor in Paglat, Maguindanao del Sur was wounded in a gun attack on December 4, 2023.

Barangay officials were both victims and perpetrators in many violent clashes. In Brgy. Rebukén, Sultan Kudarat, a series of retaliations between the barangay chairwoman and a commander of the MILF would endanger citizens and residents due to a political feud that said to have escalated since last year's polls. On January 4, 2024, a firefight erupted in Brgy. Kulambog, Sultan sa Barongis between the group of the barangay chairman and his rival candidate who lost in the 2023 polls. More than 300 families fled their homes to avoid being caught in the crossfire. According to sources, tensions between the two groups escalated following the elections.

A supposed rido settlement meeting would turn into a bloody firefight at the start of the new year. The firefight between the family of the late Datu Jamael Sinsuat and Mayor Lester Sinsuat occurred in the residence of former congressman Ronnie Sinsuat in Cotabato City in January 2. A police escort was shot dead during the incident.

In Lanao del Sur, a firefight erupted in Brgy. Maladeg, Picong, between supporters of the barangay chairman and his rival opponent who lost in the elections. Many residents near the area of firefight evacuated and temporarily stayed at some of their relatives in nearby barangays. In Pualas, three were dead in an ambush on January 14, 2024. Another firefight also erupted in Bacolod-Kalawi involving barangay chairmen from two villages in the municipality.

Inter and intra armed group conflicts

Violence is also escalating between and among armed groups in Maguindanao due to land feuds. Land boundary disputes would spark intra-MILF conflict in Shariff Saydona Mustapha between members of the 105th and 106th MILF base commands. Another firefight occurred in Brgy. Paldong, Sultan sa Barongis on November 28 involving a member of the 105th Base command also due to a land conflict.

On January 8, clashes were reported between a former MILF Task Force Ittihad member and its rival group in Brgy. Kulambog, Sultan sa Barongis.



Government officials attend to displaced residents who are seeking refuge in an elementary school in Sultan sa Barongis in December 2023 following the clashes between two armed groups due to the BSK elections. **Photo courtesy of ERN Sultan sa Barongis.**

On December 25, four members of the MILF were killed in a firefight between a group from the 118th MILF Base Command and the 105th Base Command in Brgy. Kapinpilan, Ampatuan.⁹

Inter-armed group violence saw the MILF attack the BIFF in the SPMS Box. A violent clash erupted after the BIFF attacked the house of a commander of the 105th MILF Base Command in Mamasapano on November 9.¹⁰ In Datu Salibo, the killing of a 118th Base Command member due to an improvised explosive allegedly by the BIFF-Karialan faction triggered an armed confrontation between the MILF and BIFF.

Violence expected to rise as the region heads towards the 2025 elections

Spikes in collective violence are expected as the Bangsamoro government prepares for its first parliamentary elections in 2025. The Bangsamoro Parliament still needs to approve crucial legislation to run the elections next year. Legislative actions will be contentious, and each legislative move is expected to be scrutinized. Violent disputes may emerge in the interim.

An example of the rising tension is that two parliament bills were approved in December 2023 to create three new municipalities from Datu Odin Sinsuat and Sultan Kudarat.¹¹ These bills were opposed by many, including local chief executives, and is seen as a political move to divide constituents

and garner support for the incumbent authority in preparation for the 2025 elections. Indeed, the municipalities of Datu Odin Sinsuat and Sultan Kudarat are the only towns in Maguindanao del Norte that are not politically allied with the United Bangsamoro Justice party, the political party of the MILF.

The Bangsamoro Parliament is also fast tracking the approval of the creation of the 32 parliamentary districts in the region for the 2025 elections. Political parties have started their groundwork to garner support for the registration of their political parties which would guarantee 40 seats in the parliament. Sectoral groups, such as the non-Moro indigenous peoples, are also preparing to ensure that they get rightful representatives for the eight reserved seats. These 80 seats are crucial in the election of the Bangsamoro Chief Minister, and the more allies you have in Parliament, the more chances you get elected for the highest seat in the region.

Predictions are aplenty about the looming violence in the 2025 elections and few about how legitimacy, certainty, and security will be the outcome of this much awaited democratic exercise. Violence will ignite further violence if the predictions are true—causing widespread human cost as former rebels, political warlords, and traditional elites vie for political power at the national, regional, and local level. This will happen in a backdrop where violent extremism and post-election violence still lingers. ●

⁹ 4 more dead in another Moro vs Moro gunfight in Maguindanao del Sur. 26 December 2023. Philippine Star. <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2023/12/26/2321503/4-more-dead-another-moro-vs-moro-gunfight-maguindanao-del-sur>

¹⁰ Civilians flee as MILF, BIFF clash in Mamasapano. 10 November 2023. MindaNews. <https://mindanews.com/top-stories/2023/11/civilians-flee-as-milf-biff-clash-in-mamasapano/>

¹¹ BARMM parliament OKs creation of 3 new towns in Maguindanao Norte. 21 December 2023. Philippine News Agency. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1215764>

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.

