

CRITICAL EVENTS MONITORING SYSTEM

SPECIAL BULLETIN ON COVID-19 AND CONFLICT

Period covered: 01 February - 17 April 2020

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The Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Officer of Kapai and Early Response Network member conducts thermal scanning on people entering the municipality.

Photo by MDRMO and ERN of Kapai, Lanao del Sur

Three sources of fragility have been the mainstays in the Bangsamoro prior to the current COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly shape and are shaped by the conflict to peace transition and will determine the stability and development trajectory of the region. First, the continued presence of rival armed groups as evidenced in the violence caused by extremist groups such as the Maute/Dawla Islamiyah that laid siege in Marawi in 2017 and new actors and new forms of indiscriminate bombings in public places, including suicide bombings. Second, the persistence of rival systems of property rights manifested by enduring conflicts over land and resources, and third, the presence of shadow and informal markets that occupy a significant part of Mindanao's economy.

However, the current public health crisis has surfaced a fourth marker of fragility that further complicates the region's already volatile context. The inability of the State to respond in a timely and effective manner to reduce people's vulnerabilities in the face of a pandemic has caused new tensions, pressures, and conflicts. Reports from the Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS)

and Early Response Networks (ERN) across the Bangsamoro, Eastern and Southern Mindanao, and parts of Metro Manila point to instances of intimidation, tensions, and near confrontations among citizens and implementors of quarantine measures, including of measures that are not sensitized to other cultures and practices such as of Islam.¹

This CEMS report covers the period from 01 February to 17 April 2020. It tackles the interaction of 'old conflicts' with the current public health emergency and what can be done to ensure that the pandemic response will not exacerbate tensions, divides, and violent conflict dynamics that are already at play.

¹ CEMS and ERN have expanded in coverage from February 2020 to cover the Covid emergency. To date, we have over 300 COVID-19 related reports in our database in addition to non-COVID related cases we monitor in the Bangsamoro. The monitoring of incidents related to the COVID-19 health emergency kicked into high gear in right after the confirmation of the Philippines's first case of infection on January 30. International Alert's early response capacity and the CEMS was replicated beyond the Bangsamoro region to Eastern and Southern Mindanao. Critical event reports have been generated in the National Capital Region (NCR) though these are presently limited to the Muslim enclaves in Culiati, Maharlika Village, and BASECO only.

1

PERSISTENT EXTREMIST VIOLENCE IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

DEADLY AMBUSH ON THE EVE OF RAMADHAN (SULU PROVINCE)²

As it was when war exploded three years ago in the Islamic City of Marawi on the eve of Ramadhan, another deadly encounter between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) erupted four days ahead of the Islamic holy month. The toll included 11 soldiers killed and 13 other soldiers wounded.

There were no reports of ASG casualties as of this writing, and the entire terrorist contingent seems to have escaped.³ To date, the AFP Western Mindanao Command has deployed five additional mortar teams and two AW-109 with members of the Tactical Operations Group Sulu-Tawi-Tawi to conduct mortar and bomb attacks, while five special forces companies and six mechanized weapons carriers have been mobilized to undertake pursuit operations.

Information gathered directly from partners on the ground in Sulu indicate that the encounter was planned and executed by the military. A special forces team from the 21st Infantry Battalion of the AFP was on a combat/ strike operation aimed at capturing and/or neutralizing ASG Commanders Radullan Sahiron and Hatib Sawadjaan and suspected foreign violent extremists traveling with them when the tables were turned against them by an estimated 40 terrorists.⁴

According to community reports, the ASG were conducting recruitment and training activities while stocking up on food supplies and other vital commodities. Like the community in the areas they occupied, the ASG seemed to be preparing for the fasting month of Ramadhan when the military caught up with them in Barangay Danag, Patikul municipality.

The result was tragic for the military and the communities surrounding the area. Apart from the number of killed and wounded, about 40 families from the village were displaced after they evacuated to avoid getting trapped in any retaliatory action. The terrorist group was also able to conduct cleaning operations where each of the dead or dying soldiers was shot on the head and their weapons and other combat gear stolen. Six R4 rifles, one K3 SAW, one R4 with attached 40mm GL, and one handheld Harris radio were seized by the ASG.

BIFF TARGETED ATTACKS IN DATU PIANG TOWN, MAGUINDANAO PROVINCE

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) harassed a military detachment in Barangay Uno, Datu Piang municipality

² Alert received an emergency dispatch from local partners in Sulu about the ambush less than an hour after the incident happened. Verification in the form of photographs cross-checked with police reports enabled Alert to begin sending out the information to media as early as 21.00 hrs. New protocols established by Alert direct ERN teams to strictly verify information that can be used to broadcast critical events.

³ While this bulletin only covers incidents until 17 April 2020, there were news reports on 19 April that said a grandson of an ASG leader was killed after the military conducted pursuit operations.

⁴ The number could not be independently confirmed, including reports that this was another free-for-all (*pintakasi*), akin to the Mamasapano incident in 2015. This explains why this narrative is not in the media. Local leaders decried the fact that a military operation was conducted so close to the season of Ramadhan.

in Maguindanao province using guns and mortar fire. The attack started at 21.00 hours on April 17 and lasted for half an hour, with no casualties reported on either side. The AFP countered with mortar attacks and combat clearing operations.

The BIFF attack followed the same pattern of attacks attributed to the extremist group that normally coincided with the start of Ramadhan. From 2016 to 2019, the BIFF would initiate sporadic attacks targeting checkpoints and minor detachments along major highways and thoroughfares. To date, there is no evidence that these sporadic attacks will culminate in a Marawi-type attack before Ramadhan.

RESURGENCE OF SIGHTINGS AND MOVEMENTS OF ISIS GROUPS IN MARAWI

The number of violent incidents attributed to the ISIS/Dawla Islamiya group in Lanao del Sur was substantially lower than in the previous quarter. Some members of the BIFF even surrendered to the military in Maguindanao. The cumulative data suggests that the downward trend will continue as crime-related violence, political violence, and shadow economy related violence subside.

Nevertheless, we cannot discount the possibility of the resurgence of violent extremist activities as a tactic in a period when the country's security forces have been redeployed in primary urban centers to implement quarantine measures. Reports of Lanao del Sur ERN did flag the real and constant possibility of opportunistic attacks and there is some evidence of a regrouping of ISIS/Dawla Islamiya forces in the Bubong-Kapai-Tagaloan II corridor as well as the Butig-Sultan Dumalondong-Marogong

corridor. These corridor areas straddle the border between Lanao del Sur and Bukidnon and the border between Lanao del Sur and the Iranun Corridor in Maguindanao. There is a distinct opportunity to prey on the deflected attention of the State as Ramadhan approaches and as the central government redeploys AFP assets to support pandemic-related activities.

2

TENSIONS, PRESSURES, AND INITIAL FLASHPOINTS RELATED TO THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 crisis is sparking new tensions, pressures, and violence in more households and regions than earlier expected. From early February to start of April, over 300 COVID-19-related reports were sent to International Alert's CEMS from the Bangsamoro and Eastern and Southern Mindanao.

The reports revealed many instances of confrontation, including:

- bullying and intimidation by paramilitary and barangay peacekeeping action team groups;
- the use of physical force in the application of quarantine rules;

- near-violent confrontations in checkpoints;
- heated arguments over the failure to follow social distancing rules;
- complaints and accusations that quarantine and travel passes were for sale or were not being recognized and acknowledged; and,
- the absence of protocols that apply to sensitive cultural rules in the handling of the sick and the management and disposal of the dead, especially of Muslims.

Add to the above the increasing inadequacy of food and other basic commodities in poor households that were caught unprepared when the lockdown was declared. Most of the poor and lower middle class in the monitored areas did not possess enough household stockpiles of food nor the sizeable savings needed to prevent hunger. Tensions were compounded by the long queues and waiting times for food relief packages that were insufficient and often late.

Local governments scrambled to muster resources to feed their constituents, while making sure that persons stricken with COVID-19 were hospitalized and those suspected of having it were quarantined and strictly monitored. The public perception is that the public health crisis of such a magnitude has caught national and local governments vastly unprepared despite the country's outstanding record in disaster relief and rehabilitation.

The public consensus is that emergency preparations were inexorably delayed, the government was ill-equipped, bureaucratic red tape hampered quicker responses,



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and vital information was withheld by the government. Many local government officials confessed that they were being made to take the brunt of criticism for weaknesses of the central State, in particular the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the Department of Health (DOH).

Meanwhile, nearly 300 reports unrelated to the COVID-19 contagion were also received by CEMS, showing a clear declining monthly trend in the number of conflict reports as the health emergency and its coverage by ERN members became more prominent.

However, the trends noted in January 2020 in the Bangsamoro persisted: attacks on government officials and members of the security forces, reactivation of the drug trade that had been suppressed by the Mindanao-wide martial law, clan feuding, and shooting incidents, particularly by motorcycle-riding men.





3

BOUNDARY ACTIVATION AND POLARIZATION

New boundaries are being activated by the mix of resource-related disputes, the polarization of identities, and transitional violence. The first pertains to contestation over vital resources such as water, fuel, and electricity, including the imposition of blockades to market access and exit. The second pertains to the polarization of ethnic and geographical boundaries as blame is directed towards certain identities and discriminatory actions are undertaken. The third refers to the flaring up of residual disputes and conflicts brought about by the conflict-to-peace transition in the Bangsamoro.

There are three brewing conflicts that bear close watching and will require early and preventive mediation to head off violent flashpoints that may erupt. The first pertains to the fight between the Mayor of Cotabato City and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The second pertains to the rise in resource and trade related disputes between Cotabato City and Sultan Kudarat town. The third pertains to the eruption of harassment and bullying incidents between the predominantly Muslim residents of Marawi City and the residents of Iligan City.

International Alert's youth partner Rodolfo Matucan volunteers in the door-to-door relief operations of the municipal local government of Pikit, North Cotabato, which distributed food packs to 50,000 households.

Photo by Rodolfo Matucan

THE BARMM, MILF, AND COTABATO CITY

The existing animosity and residual violence between the Mayor of Cotabato City and the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority (BTA)/BARMM and the MILF is being reinforced by the humanitarian crisis brought about by COVID-19 pandemic. Everyone is aware that Cotabato City Mayor Cynthia Guiani-Sayadi campaigned hard yet failed to prevent the inclusion of Cotabato City in the BARMM in the February 2019 plebiscite. Meanwhile, the MILF and key leaders of the BTA rallied their forces to defeat the incumbent Mayor in the 2019 mid-term elections but failed to unseat her either.

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, International Alert made known its monitoring of an imminent and deadly clash between the two heavily armed rivals that contested the mayoralty position in Cotabato City during the previous election. The possibility of a violent clash is not diminished, and an escalation is more likely because the attention of the central State is deflected by the pandemic. The only thing that stands in the way is the onset of Ramadhan and the

possibility that a showdown can be averted by other strongmen and traditional or religious leaders.

The conflicting application and management of the quarantine and lockdown of Cotabato City to prevent contamination plus the contested provision and distribution of relief supplies are reinforcing frictions that may erupt into armed violence. Tensions came to a head during the distribution of relief goods in March, with the city government refusing the food packs prepared by the regional government. Some Bangsamoro officials and workers were also held at checkpoints and denied entry into the city.

TFBM, THE CITY OF ILIGAN, AND MARAWI RESIDENTS

Marawi residents clamored to be allowed to go back to their homes within the central district that was heavily shelled during the 2017 war, pointing to the worsening condition in the temporary shelters and the very real threat of the pandemic ravaging the city's refugee camps. The pressures brought about by COVID-19 has highlighted once again the people's anger and frustrations at the delays of Task Force Bangon Marawi (TFBM).



Houses and infrastructure destroyed inside Marawi City's most affected area (MAA) after the 2017 war.

Photo by Diana Moraleda/
International Alert Philippines



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Frustrations among the Maranao have been heightened after further delays in the realization of recent promises made to them. A month before the onset of the COVID-19 lockdown, representatives of the displaced groups met with some senators who promised to help them. However, the coronavirus stopped all legislative activity just at the time when the Marawi compensation bill was being tabled for discussion in Congress.

There is also growing polarization and a dangerous restiveness brewing between the Maranao communities of Marawi and the Christian communities of Iligan City that threaten their longstanding economic and social relations. Iligan is an urban commercial center that depends on products traded in Marawi and vice versa, while the Maranao shop for food items and other goods in the big malls and wet markets of Iligan. Iligan is also crucial to the commercial and trade viability of Marawi because the city functions as a transport hub for the Maranaos who need to travel to Lanao del Norte or the Cagayan de Oro metropolis.

Yet recently, the local government of Iligan attempted to impose a lockdown that closed access points to Iligan from Marawi, claiming that the Maranao posed the risk of COVID-19 contamination in the city, especially after reports circulated of a coronavirus-infected Malaysian who

attended an Islamic gathering before traveling to Marawi. There are threats being made about the Maranao closing or destroying the water mains that run from Lake Lanao towards Iligan in retaliation for the actions being taken by the Iligan local government.

The forced quarantine has also added pressure to people working in the informal sector and who survive on daily incomes and wages. Forced to stay home by the lockdown, many workers in the informal sector who earn by the day have complained of water-less days, the lack of cash to buy food and other necessities, and delays in the assistance from the local government.

COTABATO CITY AND RESIDENTS OF SULTAN KUDARAT

The imposition of strict quarantine procedures in Cotabato City was used as the rationale behind the closure of Maguindanao's premier center for communications, transport, storage, and trade. This lockdown prevented buyers and traders from adjacent towns such as the municipality of Sultan Kudarat from entering the city to sell and buy goods or to transport vital equipment and other basic necessities.

In retaliation, the municipal government of Sultan Kudarat threatened to cut off the city's water supply, as the Rebuken water pumping station that supplies half of the city's potable water is located in the municipality. The stand-off lasted for two consecutive days. Cotabato City later eased border control to allow non-Cotabato residents to purchase goods and carry out essential activities in the city.



The facade of the Manila Golden Mosque in Quiapo, Manila.

Photo by Maureen Lacuesta/
International Alert Philippines

4

URBAN AND PERI-URBAN ISSUES

The current period has seen a rise in cases of discrimination against Muslims and other minority groups within and adjacent to the NCR. There was an early escalation of ethnic denunciation and hate language in social media because five of the earliest fatalities from the coronavirus were small entrepreneurs in the Greenhills Shopping Center in San Juan City at the center of NCR, where many Muslim-owned shops were concentrated.

Muslims in Metro Manila who perished from the coronavirus were stigmatized and refused burial even in the Muslim cemeteries of Montalban, Rizal, and Norzagaray, Bulacan. Upon representation by the Alert-

ERN in NCR to the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF), and to Muslim representatives in Congress, new guidelines and protocols pertaining for the internment of Muslims were immediately imposed and widely circulated by the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID), including instructions to stop the practice of cremation that is disallowed in Islam.

However, despite these protocols, Alert continues to receive reports of deceased Muslims being buried two to three days after death. The DILG directive to mayors to facilitate Muslim burials within 12 hours remains poorly enforced.

Finally, in the first two weeks of the Luzon-wide shut-down, many reports of persistent resistance against quarantine procedures within Muslim enclaves hogged the newspapers. The manhandling, corporal punishment, and outright detention of young Muslims was highlighted by a broadcast station's video of a police official threatening and beating a person with a stick who went out of the Golden Mosque compound in Quiapo, Manila. In Marawi, a group of pedicab drivers who wanted to get relief goods from city hall were held up at a checkpoint and had their licenses confiscated by the police, forcing them to stand under the heat of the sun for an hour.

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5

GRP-CNN RELATED VIOLENCE

Both the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front (CNN) ceasefires remained in place until April 15, though it was clear that both sides were violating their own declarations. Hence, the ceasefire has become increasingly fragile even before the CNN extended theirs until the end of April 2020.

Several clashes have occurred in the towns of Eastern Rizal and Quezon province in Luzon, as well as in the Davao provinces and in the northern Mindanao areas of Misamis Oriental and Bukidnon. As is usually the case, both sides have hurled accusations of ceasefire violations against each other. These are to be expected in the absence of shared rules and coordination structures between the two parties because their ceasefires were unilateral and unconditional.

There is unassailable evidence that the human costs from the GRP-CNN conflict has declined significantly over the past two months in contrast to the previous months. Indeed, despite the reported violations, each party has restrained its respective forces from undertaking widescale military operations and tactical offensives.


Media reports also demonstrate the wider recognition and support of local communities towards the AFP and PNP as frontline actors in the effort to combat the COVID-19 threat. This is validated by independent tri-media reports posts that show the appreciation of the public to the sacrifices being made by the military and police to protect local communities.

ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Sulu debacle ranks as the deadliest military outcome for the Philippine government in the first half of 2020. That it occurred while a pandemic was ravaging the country can only mean that it will receive less media coverage in contrast to the drumbeat of heroism and sacrifice that heralded the martyrdom of the soldiers who fell in Marawi and Mamasapano.

This poses a critical dilemma for the AFP and the President. Getting mired in a wider military campaign to seek justice and retaliate will negatively affect the deployment of troops that are currently being harnessed to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, a downgrading in pursuit operations will also affect army morale and increase the likelihood of indiscriminate attacks against easier targets such as the communities in the areas where the ASG was encamped before the clash occurred.

Tensions are ramping up in many areas under quarantine, whether in urban, peri-urban, or rural areas, and these pressures could explode into higher levels of collective violence due to the activation and mobilization of boundaries along geographic and religious identifiers.



A woman holds her relief pack from community members who donated their harvests in Mamasapano, Maguindanao. The relief drive was organised by youth members in the municipality.

Photo by Jehan Aduna Ali

Framing conflicts as disputes between Muslim and Christian, or fights between citizens of Marawi versus citizens of Iligan masks the underlying and fundamental contestation and competition over the distribution and control over resources such as food, water, and other basic commodities. Challenges around resource sharing and the removal of barriers to trade during humanitarian emergencies such as a pandemic are less difficult to address. Dialogue, diplomacy, and mediation can produce more pragmatic solutions to these problems.

Instead, some groups are trying to mobilize a wider constituency through the use of religious and geopolitical signifiers that can be easily mobilized to engage in the sort of collective violence that can transform a fistfight into a brawl, a brawl into a riot, and a riot into collective destruction.

Preventing tensions and pressures from being mobilized to justify higher levels of collective violence entails coordinated and collective efforts at mediation. The first order of business should be to utilize all means possible to prevent a deadly showdown between the incumbent Mayor of Cotabato City and her rivals.

The situation of the informal sector is probably the most combustible at present, as most of these occupations are dependent on daily incomes and wages, very little food is held in storage, and their families live in cramped spaces where the very real threat of contagion exists. Without immediate relief, people in the informal sector may be tempted to shift away from their involvement in coping economies towards engagement in the more deadly shadow economies of illegal drugs, illegal guns, kidnap-for-ransom, or guns-for-hire.

There is a very real threat that the refugees and the other families displaced by the

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2017 war in Marawi, especially those living in squalid temporary shelters will use the current situation to forcibly occupy parts of the city's most affected area. It is in the interest of the LGU units at the provincial, city, and municipal level to ensure that they are not treated violently and that substantial resources are ringfenced and delivered urgently to the displaced.

There is every likelihood that the compensation bill for the people who lost relatives and properties in the siege of Marawi will be further delayed, and that the draft bills may have to be shelved and refiled when Congress reopens. It is important that adequate support is given and sustained for the multi-stakeholder constituency behind the demand for just compensation.

Finally, there are other potential sources of increased violence while the pandemic sweeps through the country – in particular, the armed conflict between the GRP and the CNN that went through a period of parallel unilateral ceasefires that ended on April 15, 2020.

The CNN has extended its ceasefire until the end of April 2020, even though the GRP has announced it will not extend the ceasefire and instead restart combat operations against the rebel group. In the meantime, the United Nations has reiterated its call for a global ceasefire, including the release

of many people deprived of liberty (PDL) around the world who are directly vulnerable to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, especially those recognized as prisoners of conscience and the sick, elderly, and those suffering from disabilities.

Multi-stakeholder groups and the general public must press for an extended ceasefire by both parties with an indefinite time frame. The overarching objective is to sustain the gains that have been achieved in mobilizing a strong safety and security response that disrupted the further spread of the virus especially among the poor and other vulnerable groups in Philippine society.

There is also a need for some level of ceasefire coordination to prevent violent clashes and to disrupt the growing fragility of the current cessation of hostilities. The objectives are to (a) generate the needed trust and goodwill to bring unilateral ceasefires to a higher level (coordinated unilateral ceasefire up to a bilateral

ceasefire) and (b) to create conducive conditions for the start of back channel talks towards an interim peace agreement (IPA).

The GRP can begin the process of releasing PDL in response to the very real threats posed by the current pandemic. This process can include the release of prisoners who will feature prominently in future back channel and formal negotiations in the GRP-CNN peace process.

These policy positions are well and should be actively supported to ensure that warring parties cease all hostilities immediately and that all vulnerable groups, including PDLs, receive the social protection that they need. However, what is more important, decisive, and necessary is that domestic and international pressure is brought upon the warring parties to a conflict and to convince them to work sincerely and actively to reach a political settlement that will produce a just and lasting peace.

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.

