



INTERNAL RUPTURES WITHIN THE BANGSAMORO

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



international
alert
PHILIPPINES

17 FEBRUARY 2022

The run-up to the 2022 elections has seen a remarkable escalation in violence between and among actors least expected to be the source of uncertainty, instability, and crisis in a region transitioning from conflict to peace. The rupture is occurring within the ranks of armed groups that have entered into peace agreements with the government but not with their rivals.

Intra and intergroup violence

Inter and intra-group violence between and among the clans and armed followers of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) commanders, decommissioned or otherwise, has contributed significantly to the fear and anxiety of people in the Bangsamoro beyond the pandemic and the pre-election violence combined. Not a week passes where there is no news about an MILF commander fighting another or squaring off with the rival Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) or the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). The added difficulty of distinguishing one group from the other is laid bare by the strong kinship ties that intersect these organizations.

Cases of alleged bullying by the MILF, MNLF, and BIFF of non-Muslim indigenous communities are rising too, together with reported movements of fighters and their families from one place to another while carrying illicit weapons and challenging the authority of police and military checkpoints.

The situation exposes serious flaws in the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), specifically the normalization agreement on decommissioning and its accompanying transitional justice arrangements. The absence of any provision to proscribe the use of rebel-held weapons during the transition is one major weakness. The absence of a quick-response dispute settlement body as part of the transitional justice mechanism to settle violent clan and land-related disputes is another.

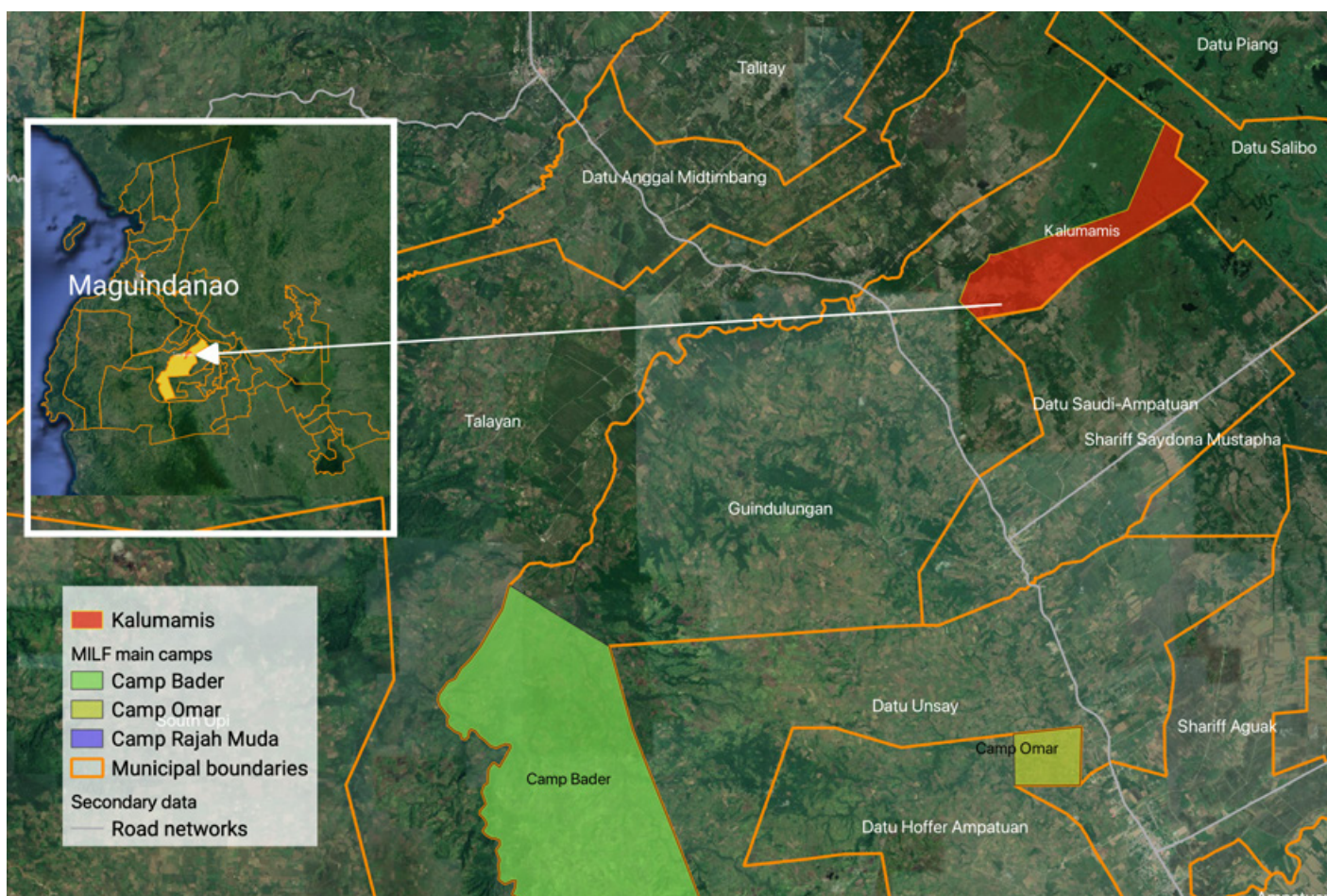
From the second half of 2021, violent incidents involving MILF commanders have become the staple of conflict monitoring in the province of Maguindanao and its borders adjacent to Lanao del Sur and North Cotabato.

Ruptures between kinship networks and former comrades in arms are often propelled by enduring land conflicts between MILF commanders, between MILF and MNLF commanders, and between MILF and other armed groups of indigenous peoples and settlers—an alarming situation in the conflict-to-peace and the pandemic to post-pandemic transition that was first raised by the International Alert Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) - Early Response Network (ERN) Bulletins in 2020 and 2021.

Alert emphasized that these flashpoints possessed a higher propensity to trigger further episodes or “strings of violence” due to their vertical connections to powerful provincial and regional authorities, and their access to illicit weapons and kinship networks that enabled them to engage in long-term violence (International Alert, 2020). Alert also highlighted the scores of unsettled clan feuds involving land and election-related conflicts, disrupted by the pandemic lockdowns, that are bound to reignite once the situation shifts.

MILF-associated violence

The most recent incident involving the MILF occurred on 12 February 2022 in a remote area in Sitio Dam, Barangay Kalumamis, Guindulungan, Maguindanao. Nine people were killed, led by a ranking MILF commander named Peges Lentagi Mamasained, a.k.a.



Site of the ambush in Guindulungan, Maguindanao. Map produced by International Alert Philippines

Commander Black Magic of the MILF - Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) Inner Guard.

The irony is that the ambush site fell within the perimeter area of a known MILF camp—Camp Bader, an area straddling the towns of Guindulungan, Talayan, and Datu Unsay in Maguindanao province. These camps are supposed to be the beacons of the peaceful transition from conflict where massive infrastructure and development investments are being poured by development banks and bilateral and multilateral aid agencies.

As a member of the BIAF-IG, Mamasaing had powerful credentials and reported directly to the MILF central committee. The victims were heavily armed and aboard two utility vehicles and were on their way to Barangay Kitapok, Datu Saudi Ampatuan, for a clan

feud settlement before they were attacked. Commander Black Magic died together with three of his sons and five other relatives and supporters. Three persons survived the attack and sustained gunshot wounds. At the time of the incident, Commander Black Magic was reportedly carrying blood money for the rido settlement. The blood money and the group's firearms were taken by the perpetrators after the incident.

Authorities were able to identify the perpetrators as close relatives of Commander Black Magic. In fact, the attackers were led by his first cousin Jordan Mama Lintang, alias Commander Jordan, initially thought to be MILF but was later reported to be a member of the MNLF. He was accompanied by his son and several other accomplices. Witness accounts showed the ferocity of the attack and the helplessness of the victims who were



Authorities inspect the ambushed vehicles in Guindulungan, Maguindanao on 12 February 2022. Photo by Ferdinandh Cabrera

trapped inside their vehicles. Others who managed to run away were chased and killed.

The clan feud they were concluding involved the family of Jordan, who was accused of participation in the fatal shooting of a mother and her son by unknown killers riding in tandem along the Isulan-Cotabato highway on December 5, 2021. The killing was allegedly upon orders of a local mayor in the SPMS box, Maguindanao. The woman's husband had been killed earlier and local sources reported that the son of Commander Jordan allegedly perpetrated the killing.

Retaliation swiftly followed with the reported assassination of a member of Jordan's clan, and Black Magic and his kin were on their way to meet with the family to finally end the feud. However, instead of ending the violence, the attack has ignited a more violent cycle of retribution.

Apart from the political as well as the identity-related feuding between the two groups, there is also the hidden angle about the control over the distribution and trade in illicit drugs that allegedly involved members of both warring parties.

MILF commanders clash anew on land issues in parallel feud in Sultan Kudarat

Another clash occurred on 7 February 2022 involving the commanders of armed groups claiming to be part of the MILF in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. Two combatants died when armed men headed by alleged MILF Commander Jun Barang clashed with the followers of Commander Gringo in Barangay Senditan, Sultan

Kudarat, resulting in the displacement of an estimated 300 persons or 50 families. The encounter lasted for several hours before a ceasefire was reached upon the intercession of MILF CCCH, GPH, AFP, PNP, and LGU officials.

However, on the night of 10 February until the early morning of 11 February 2022, they resumed fighting in the tri-boundary areas of Cotabato City, Sultan Mastura, and Sultan Kudarat. The feud became more violent and destructive, with several houses being looted and destroyed.

The land conflict and fight for control over territory have been ongoing since 2019. Local sources also reported that since 2019, Jun Barang was no longer associated nor recognized by the MILF. However, his group remains in possession of a deadly arsenal of weapons.

These clashes are only a continuation of previous episodes of violence between the two groups. In December 2021, civilians in Sitio Badak in the boundary of Brgy. Senditan, Sultan Kudarat and Brgy Solon, Sultan Mastura and areas in Purok Darping,

Kalanganan-1 Cotabato City in Sultan Kudarat evacuated when armed clashes happened between 5 to 7 December 2021. The MILF-CCCH, with the support of the military and police, deployed Task Force Ittihad and the Marine Battalion Landing Team 5 to prevent further clashes. However, it is obvious that this measure has not prevented the clashes from reigniting.

Looming convulsion of violence as competing local, provincial, and regional politicians fight for power in the May 2022 election

Alert has also identified many ongoing political feuds turning violent across the Bangsamoro mainland, where local, provincial, and regional dynamics are involved and the MILF shadow lurks in the background. Among these cases are the ongoing feuds monitored in Guindulungan, Datu Piang, Shariff Aguak, Datu Paglas, and Cotabato City.

One of the most critical in this mixture of local, provincial, and regional conflict dynamics is the ongoing feud in Talitay, Maguindanao. The violent feud in the area includes issues pertaining to control over political office in the town and the province of Maguindanao as well as control over the illicit trade and distribution of illicit drugs. As the experience in Talitay demonstrates, a violent rido can disrupt the normal functioning of government and cause violent fissures among various political families and clans.

A violent clan feud was reignited in March 2021 between the late former Mayor Montasir Sabal and a rival clan associated with the MILF that displaced about 700 families or 3,500 individuals. The massive displacement prompted the Council of Talitay to declare the area under a state of calamity. Montasir was later arrested in the anti-drug war of the government and killed inside a police vehicle while being transported from Batangas City

to Camp Crame after he allegedly tried to grab the gun of one of his police escorts.

The Ministry of Interior and Local Government of the BARMM (MILG-BARMM) thereafter appointed Acting Vice-Mayor Moner Sabal as the new Mayor of Talitay. However, according to local sources, Moner Sabal failed to show up in his office and undertake his duties. This apparent absence without leave (AWOL) created a vacuum that prompted the provincial government to install someone else in his place.

Maguindanao Gov. Bai Mariam Mangudadatu of the powerful Mangudadatu political clan appointed Talitay Municipal Councilor Fahad Midtimbang to act as Mayor. The replacement order heightened tensions between the provincial governor and the MILF leadership in the BARMM – who had earlier supported a rival candidate for the post of Maguindanao governor in the 2022 elections.

Minister Naguib Sinarimbo of the MILG-BARMM opposed the governor's decision and a stalemate remains. Since August 24, 2021, Moner Sabal has remained as the de jure Mayor, though Fahad Midtimbang is effectively exercising the duties of his office.

The Talitay feud is something to watch out for, as rivalries intensify between armed groups at various levels. For example, Gov. Bai Mariam is identified with the Ampatuan clan and is allied with the former Sultan Kudarat governor Pax Mangudadatu. Meanwhile, Gov. Bai Mariam's competitor for the provincial post of Maguindanao represents the other side of the Mangudadatu clan headed by Rep. Esmael 'Toto' Mangudadatu, allied with the MILF. The two clans also vie for the gubernatorial seat of Sultan Kudarat, with the son of Gov. Bai Mariam, Datu Pax Datu Ali Pax Mangudadatu, incumbent mayor of Datu Abdullah Sangki town in Maguindanao, is running against the wife of Rep. Mangudadatu, Sharifa Akeel-

Mangudadatu. What complicates the matter even more is the cancelation of the COMELEC of the certificate of candidacy of Mayor Datu Pax Mangudadatu for alleged lack of residency. Apart from these, other potential convulsions are anticipated, including those for the mayoralty of the Cotabato City and in Datu Piang, to name a few.

It is important to understand that these tensions are partly the outcome of a twist in the political posturing of the MILF leadership regarding local elections. Having convinced President Duterte to agree to a postponement of the BARMM elections due to electoral unpreparedness and the unfinished business of transitional governance—the MILF promptly turned around to actively participate in the mid-term elections by using their clout, influence, and resources to support rival candidates that did not subscribe to their demand for no-elections at the Bangsamoro regional level.

Unending tensions between the MILF and indigenous peoples

In the meantime, there has been no respite in reported cases of intimidation and harassment against the Teduray and other non-Islamized indigenous groups by armed groups associated with the MILF. The Alert CEMS reported the presence of armed men in coastal areas of Maguindanao, particularly in Datu Blah Sinsuat, where the MILF is reportedly intensifying its recruitment and expansion in the area, causing concern among IP residents.

Alert reported in October 2021 that armed groups with links to MILF Commanders Micro and Bulantoy had been allegedly forcing the Teduray of Barangay Kuya and Barangay Jordan in South Upi to join a “cooperative” being organized in the area. Local sources have reported that the organization of a cooperative is only part of a bigger scheme for

the armed groups to qualify as beneficiaries under the BARMM development programs. Apart from these onerous attempts to corner development funds in the name of the indigenous peoples, local leaders have also been targeted by the BIFF in numerous cases involving land in South Upi, Maguindanao and Lebak, Sultan Kudarat.

Urgent actions

First, recent events have cast a shadow over the normalization program and particularly the decommissioning process. It is obvious that the absence of any provision about the management and control of illicit weapons still in the hands of MILF combatants, decommissioned or otherwise, is a crucial flaw in the normalization process. ***How can rebel access and use of weapons be controlled during the transition period?***

Second, a more serious examination of the potential fractures in the CAB and the BOL brought about by the armed actions of numerous groups, including the MILF, needs to be undertaken. The MILF and its combatants should stop reproducing the violence emanating from their ranks in the past year. Continued access to illicit weapons and munitions makes the threat of violence very real. The situation begs the question: ***What processes can be put in place so that the MILF and BARMM leadership can prevent rather than just respond to onsets of violence? What new security measures can enable faster emergency response to violence?***

Third, there is growing uncertainty and insecurity about personal, family, and community protection as the BIAF and its weapons are decommissioned. Danger will be imminent if their insecurity is assuaged by the protection offered by other armed groups present in the area, including criminal groups, those affiliated to ISIS, or even the insurgent

CPP/NPA. ***How soon can the registration of weapons in the hands of former rebels be undertaken?***

Fourth, clan feuding seems to be a convenient foil for more insidious types of violence. The treachery and the brutality suffered by victims of an ambush will certainly unleash a flurry of preparations for retribution, and the investigative team dispatched by the MILF will have difficulty heading off a quick and violent retaliation. ***Are the joint security teams adequate when the protagonists to violence are embedded in the same apparatus? How can government security forces act pro-actively and faster to prevent cycles of intra and intergroup violence?***

Fifth, most of the violent incidents in this report occurred soon after the Commission on Elections passed Resolution No. 10728, enforcing a 150-day gun ban during the election period. The statute prohibits the unauthorized bearing, carrying, or transportation of firearms and deadly weapons outside residences, businesses, and public places. Yet ambushes and attacks are conducted in broad daylight in populated areas by people who flaunt the rules on gun control. ***How can the national government put an end to the persistent mockery of election-related gun bans in Mindanao and other areas?***

Finally, beyond coming up with a statement to end violence and the installation of task forces to prevent deadly feuding, ***what can the incumbent leadership of the BTA and the MILF undertake that will prevent an escalation of violence now and in the future as the country moves towards the 2022 national elections and the Bangsamoro continues its transition process?***

The entire central Mindanao area is now seeing the violent outcomes of political and economic changes happening in the pre-election and hopefully, post-pandemic period. The intensity of inter and intragroup violence has been accompanied by a spike in shadow economy-related violence in illegal drugs and weapons as well as a wave of bombings perpetrated by ISIS-affiliated groups. These are indicative of a new cycle of criminal and terrorist violence that makes the settlement of internal feuds more urgent and strategic. ●

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 ERN Lanao del Sur and TASBIKKA, Inc.

