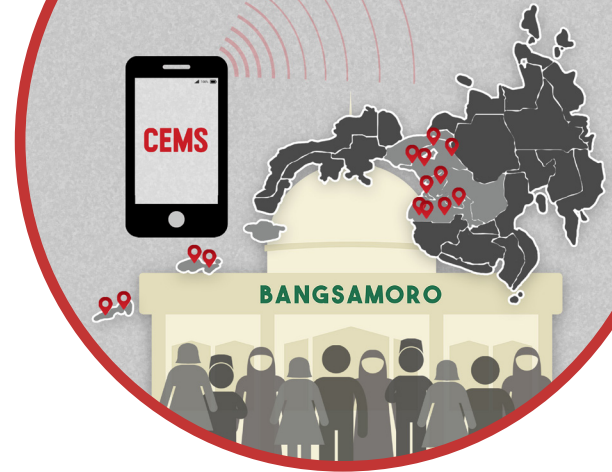


CRITICAL EVENTS MONITORING SYSTEM BULLETIN

Period covered: October - December 2019

Date of release: 29 January 2020



Martial law gains diminishing

Martial law, first declared in May 2017 at the start of the Marawi Siege, ushered in a period of relative peace in the Muslim Mindanao provinces. Conflict incidents and deaths dropped in 2018 from the previous year.¹

By the last quarter of 2019, however, Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur had slid back into violence, as depicted by Early Response Network reports.² Shooting and bombing incidents targeted civilians, soldiers, policemen, and locally-elected officials. Clans attacked other clans. Extremists continued to recruit and launch attacks, triggering displacement. All the while, the transition to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and rebuilding of Marawi City proceeded, causing tensions and violence.

Martial law lifted by end of 2019, as the Duterte government chose not to extend it, citing lower criminality and weaker extremist and terrorist threats.³ But where Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur were concerned, these gains were already diminishing.

Shooting, bombing incidents target civilians, security personnel

Shooting and bombing incidents sowed panic as they targeted ordinary civilians as well as policemen and soldiers.

Among the incidents was the shooting of a student of the Mindanao State University (MSU) in Marawi City while walking with a friend one night in October. In the same city, the next month, three carpenters were shot in Brgy. Emie Punud, near the temporary shelters for families displaced by the Marawi war, while on their way to their construction site.

¹ International Alert Philippines, *Conflict Alert 2019: War Makes States*, Quezon City: International Alert Philippines, 2019, <http://conflicalert.info/publication/war-makes-states/>

² ERN members send reports to the Critical Events Monitoring System or CEMS. They 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. Their reports are transmitted through SMS, stored in a database, and processed for deployment of context-specific responses by key stakeholders on the ground. Around 400 reports were received in October, November and December 2019.

³ Rappler.com, *No extension of martial law in Mindanao*, says Malacañang, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/246898-duterte-no-extension-martial-law-mindanao> (accessed 21 January 2020)

Marawi was also the scene of the killing of a soldier assigned with the Army's Engineering Brigade in October. He was aboard a motorcycle and was shot and killed by a man who then took the vehicle. Two months later, at the national road between Pagayawan and Binidayan towns in Lanao del Sur, a brazen attack on a police patrol car killed the Binidayan police chief and the vehicle's driver. The ambush was said to be in retaliation for the police chief's confiscation of fake cigarettes.

In Maguindanao, policemen and soldiers had been victimized, often by a gunman aboard a motorcycle driven by a companion. A policeman assigned with the regional mobile police force of the BARMM was shot and killed in Sultan Kudarat town while a Marine assigned in Maguindanao was shot along Notre Dame Avenue in Cotabato City. The two incidents took place in October.

Soldiers were also targeted in grenade attacks. Members of Task Force Kutawato, formed in April 2017 to go after crime and terror groups, were buying food at a store along Sinsuat Avenue in Cotabato City in November when a grenade was lobbed at the establishment. Fortunately, it did not explode. Members of the Army's Special Forces assigned to guard the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Cotabato City in December were not as lucky. Blast from a grenade thrown by men aboard a motorcycle injured eight of them as well as several civilians. More soldiers and civilians would have been hurt had improvised explosives not been discovered in other parts of the city and defused by authorities.

Cotabato City and regional police made a breakthrough in November and arrested two suspected guns-for-hire believed to be behind the murders of policemen, soldiers, and businessmen in the city and other parts of Maguindanao. One of them died in a shootout with the police while the other was wounded after they allegedly resisted arrest.

Recently, the Cotabato City police said they were able to identify two suspects of the December blast, tagging them as guns-for-hire and members of an armed group.⁴

Clan feuding fuels retaliations

Families and clans turned their conflicts bloody as they avenged wrongs done to them. However, they also invited retaliation for their attacks.

Malabang was shaken anew in October as two clans engaged in a gunfight. One of the clans sought to avenge the killing of one of its members, a well-known barangay chairman, in September. Some Malabang residents moved to other towns to avoid getting caught in the conflict while others transferred their children to other schools.

In November, Masiu Mayor Nasser Pangandaman Jr. became the target of an ambush. He and his companions were in a convoy, headed for Masiu from Marawi, when ambushed in Buadiposo-Buntung, five towns away from their destination. Nasser Jr., son of former Agrarian Reform Secretary

⁴ Malu Cadelina-Manar, MindaNews, *2 suspects in Cotabato City's grenade attack in December charged*, <https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2020/01/2-suspects-in-cotabato-citys-grenade-attack-in-december-charged/> (accessed 13 January 2020)

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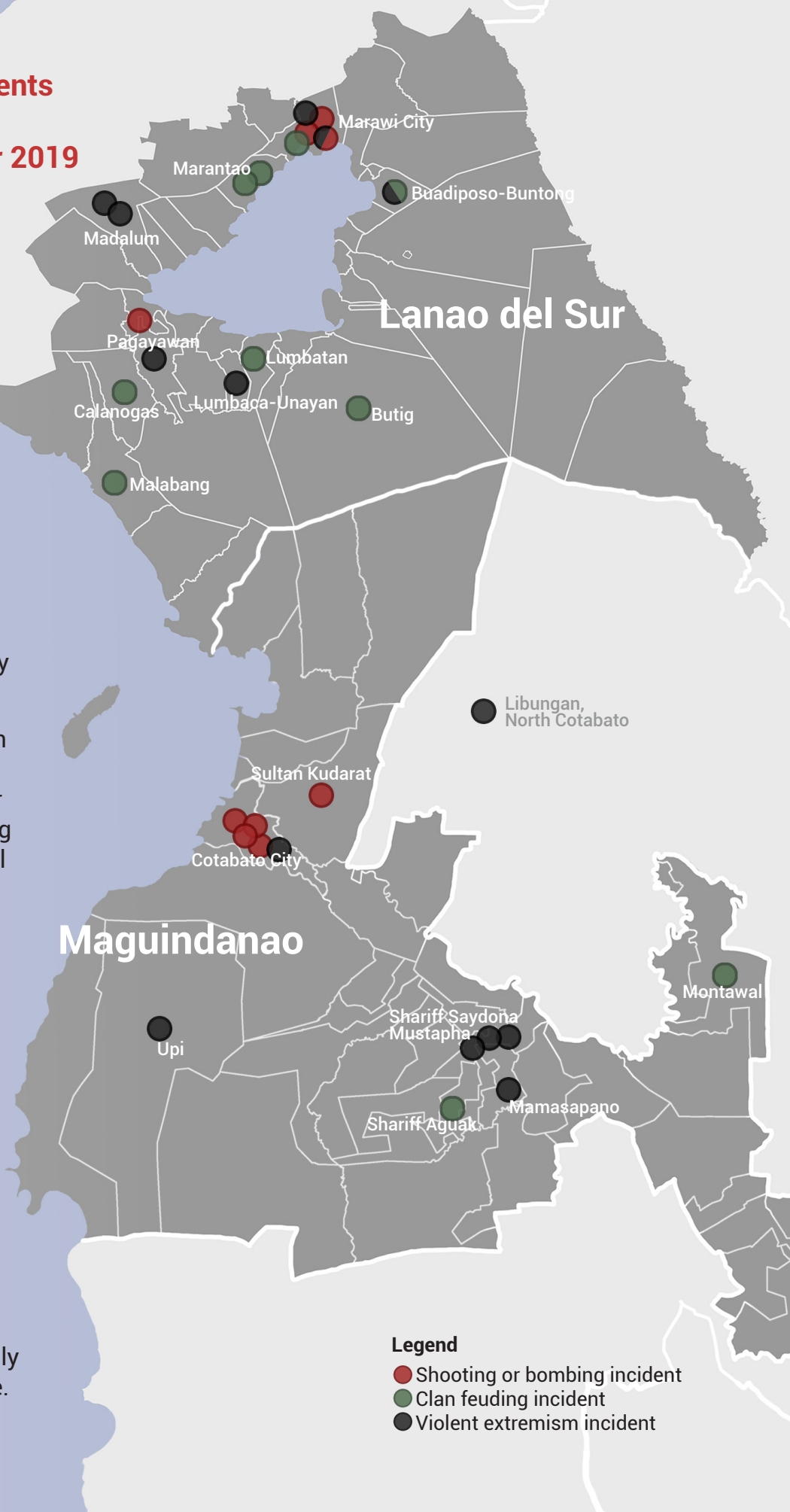
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Violent conflict incidents and critical events, October to December 2019

Nasser Pangandaman Sr., was unharmed but three of his companions were wounded. The attack was allegedly masterminded by a political opponent.

In December, the chairman of Brgy. Punud, Marantao, was shot as he headed for the mosque after attending a meeting of the municipal anti-drug abuse council. His killing was reportedly due to a grudge.

A lingering grudge likely fueled the ambush of Akmad Ampatuan, vice mayor of Shariff Aguak town in Maguindanao last December. He survived the attack but not his two companions. Ampatuan also survived an ambush in 2014. Ampatuan had testified against relatives, who were convicted, also last December, for the grisly 2009 Ampatuan massacre.



Legend

- Shooting or bombing incident
- Clan feuding incident
- Violent extremism incident

In Montawal town (formerly Pagagawan) in Maguindanao, two commanders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), said to be embroiled in a land dispute, broke the terms of their agreement and traded gunfire, forcing hundreds of residents to flee to other villages.⁵ The fighting stopped after three days and intervention by the Montawal local government and the military, as well as the Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities and the International Monitoring Team tasked with monitoring the government-MILF ceasefire agreement.

ERN members also reported tensions and violence between feuding families and clans in Marawi, Marantao, Butig, Calanogas, and Lumbatan in Lanao del Sur in October and November.

The hold of violent extremism and the communist threat

In Lanao del Sur, recruitment by extremist groups has continued and there have been numerous sightings of the 'Maute' and 'men in black' – as how Lanao residents referred to ISIS militants – in various parts of the province. The military continues to chase after them: in Marawi City in October; Madalum and Pagayawan in November; and Madalum and Lumbaca-Unayan in December.

Lacking strong leaders and splintered into groups, the current crop of ISIS adherents haven't launched coordinated, large-scale attacks. Still, they have left a bloody trail. The shooter of the MSU student was said to be a new recruit and the shooting was believed to be part of the training. The main suspect

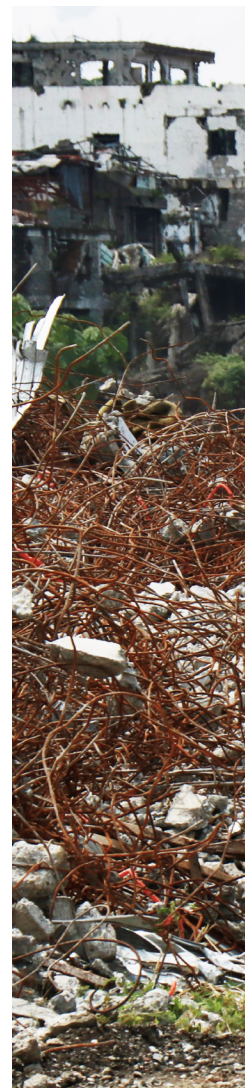
in the Pangandaman ambush was said to be an ISIS member with links to drugs and kidnapping – a known criminal – who was allegedly contracted by Pangandaman's political opponent.

In Maguindanao, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), which have pledged loyalty to ISIS, continue to be potent in the 'SPMS Box' towns of Shariff Aguak, Mamasapano, Datu Salibo, Shariff Saydona Mustapha, Rajah Buayan, and Datu Saudi-Ampatuan.

In October, they attacked members of Task Force Ittihad, organized by the MILF-Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) to help the government neutralize the BIFF, as required under their peace deal.

Seven Ittihad fighters were killed in the firefight in Shariff Saydona Mustapha, after which they were beheaded. A video of the clash that circulated caught the BIFF accusing them of being "murtad" or having turned their backs on Islam. Later in the month, a group of MILF-BIAF fighters, while on patrol with soldiers in Shariff Saydona Mustapha, were hit with the blast from an improvised explosive believed to have been planted by the BIFF. Seven MILF-BIAF members were wounded.

⁵ Edwin O. Fernandez, Inquirer.net, *At least 600 Moro families flee as clan war erupts in Maguindanao*, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1177675/at-least-600-moro-families-flee-as-clan-war-erupts-in-maguindanao> (accessed 13 December 2019)



The military also continues to battle the BIFF, seemingly without any glimmer of victory. In November, fighting broke out, first in Mamasapano, then in Shariff Saydona Mustapha, displacing thousands of families.

In Cotabato City and nearby areas, ISIS presence has been detected by the military. In fact, the military tagged the BIFF as responsible for the Cotabato City grenade blast in December as well as the bombings in Libungan, North Cotabato that shortly came after. Explosives were also found in Upi, Maguindanao. The military has not changed its opinion despite the Cotabato City police saying

guns-for-hire were responsible for the December incident.

Lanao del Sur also confronts a new conflict actor: the New People's Army (NPA), which has been driven to the province's thick forests by the unrelenting military offensives in the provinces on Mindanao's eastern corridor. The NPA, the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, adds to Lanao's deadly brew of Maute Group remnants, new ISIS recruits, families and clans in bloody feuds, and syndicates engaged in shadow activities in drugs and guns, among others.



Debris of demolished infrastructure in the Most Affected Area (MAA) in Marawi City.

*Photo by Diana Moraleda/
International Alert Philippines*

Inability to return home and a new military camp

Marawi residents' inability to rebuild homes or reclaim land in the city's destroyed core (commonly called 'most affected area' or MAA) and government plans that exclude them have created resentment and provided the conditions for recruitment by ISIS and other non-state armed groups.

Around 66,000 people are still displaced after the war ended in 2017. If they want to return to the MAA and rebuild homes, they have to apply for building permits. They must also satisfy a slew of requirements including validation as having been displaced by the war, proof of land ownership, proof of real property tax payments, and building

plans approved by a civil engineer or architect. These are difficult to comply with, as most residents had lost official documents and savings during the war.

Some displaced clans belatedly discovered that their homes on the lakeshore, which was heavily shelled during the war, had been demolished. They learned about the demolition permit only in October, although it was signed by Marawi Mayor Majul Gandamra months prior. The mayor had cited safety reasons, as the area was said to be littered with the most number of unexploded ordnance in the MAA. Doubts have lingered over the reason cited, with residents perceiving that commercial interests were at play over this decision. For the displaced

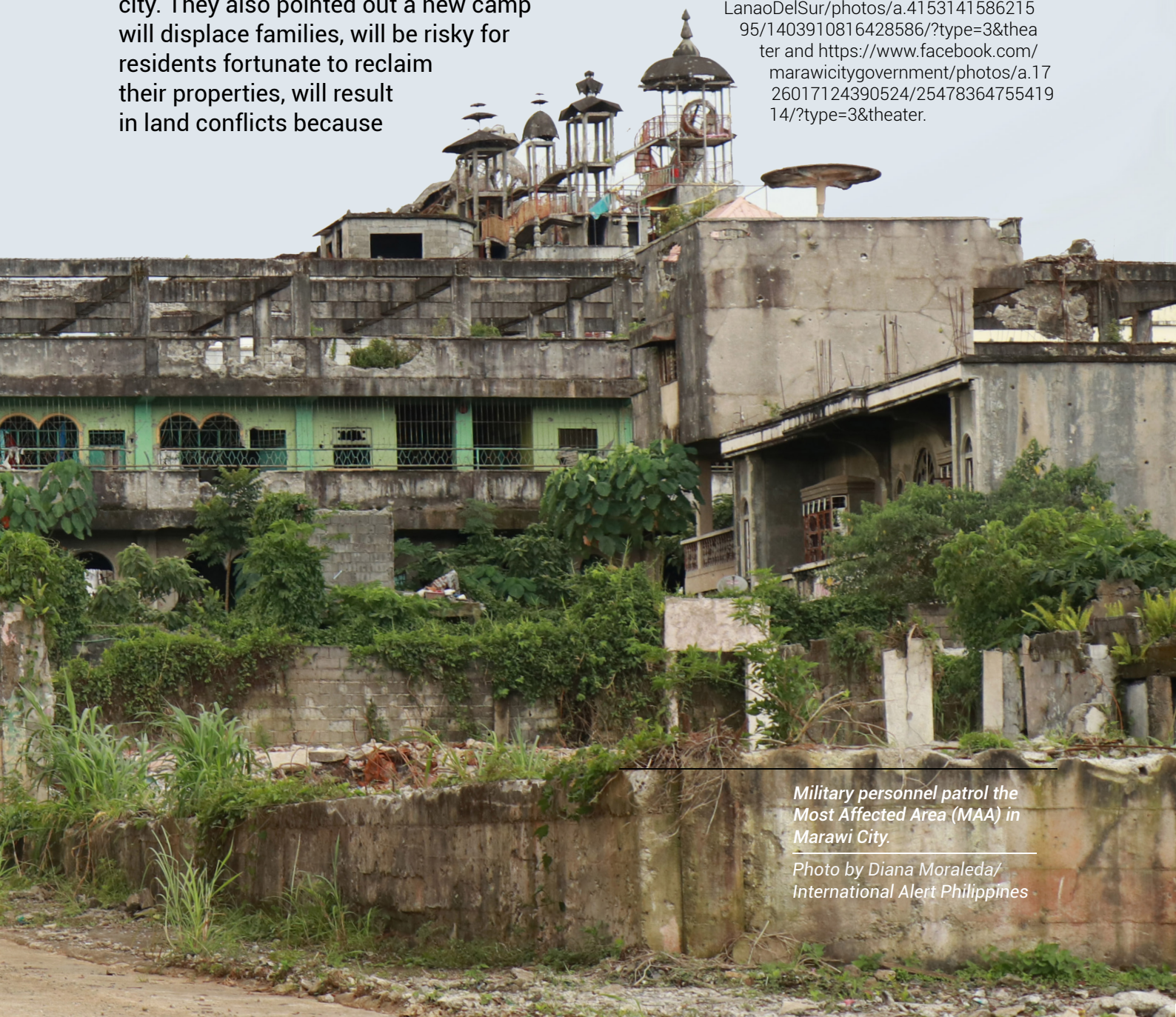


families, reclaiming their properties could be difficult as the lakeshore has been earmarked for a variety of public structures.

The government has planned a new military camp to be built within the MAA, reasoning this would help prevent extremists from again infiltrating and waging another attack on Marawi. The plan has angered residents, who do not see the need for a new camp when there is an existing military camp – Campo Ranao – within the city. They also pointed out a new camp will displace families, will be risky for residents fortunate to reclaim their properties, will result in land conflicts because

of unsettled overlapping claims, and violate cultural and religious norms. It will also represent the militarization of Marawi, which is contrary to the terms of normalization under the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro between the government and the MILF. Local government leaders have suggested expanding and modernizing Campo Ranao, installing military detachments in the MAA, or putting the new military camp at a different site.⁶

⁶ See <https://www.facebook.com/PIO.LanaoDelSur/photos/a.415314158621595/1403910816428586/?type=3&theater> and <https://www.facebook.com/marawicitygovernment/photos/a.1726017124390524/2547836475541914/?type=3&theater>.



Military personnel patrol the Most Affected Area (MAA) in Marawi City.

*Photo by Diana Moraleda/
International Alert Philippines*

The facade of the Office of the Chief Minister of the BARMM, formerly the Office of the Regional Governor of ARMM, in Cotabato City.

*Photo by Maureen Lacuesta/
International Alert Philippines*



Violence in the transition to BARMM

The transition to BARMM and the normalization of MILF combatants created tensions and conflicts, some of which had turned violent.

Some 6,000 employees of the defunct Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) have been laid off, in accordance with the provisions of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL). Those who did not accept separation packages may apply with the BARMM while those who did cannot within a five-year period. Some ARMM employees complained that during the campaign to ratify the BOL, they were promised they would not be retrenched but now find themselves out of work. Meanwhile, the positions they vacated have raised high expectations among the region's residents of getting a placement in the BARMM. As early as March 2019, some have scrambled to get recommendation letters from BARMM appointees to get a head start over others. Some have been promised jobs.

Some ARMM employees who will be retained in departments crucial in the provision of social services – education, health and social welfare – have become agitated over the process of their transfer to the BARMM. A post on a Facebook group page in October urged employees of one of these departments to resist having to requalify for their positions.

MILF members are anticipating the fruits of their peace agreement with the government. Some look forward to employment in the BARMM while others have begun staking their claim on resources, notably land, sparking conflicts with residents who have prior claims.

The MILF's normalization – or transition to civilian life – is ongoing but this is fraught with issues. What's often highlighted is the decommissioning of combatants and weapons and the development of the MILF camps. There has been silence over the matter of the MILF's detention centers, which duplicate the state's justice system and are a source of tensions and violence in

communities where they are opposed. In one town in Lanao del Sur, for instance, a resident sprayed an MILF camp with bullets after his release from detention due to charges of illegal logging.

What weapons will be decommissioned and how ready are the MILF fighters to give these up are other issues. The MILF has said only guns that belong to the organization will be turned over to the Independent Decommissioning

Body and members will keep those that are theirs.⁷ This, however, will be tantamount to creating civilians holding illegal firearms. The timing of the decommissioning is also sensitive in view of the BIFF threat, as well as threats from other armed groups. The MILF-BIAF, as partner of the military in neutralizing terror and extremist groups, are also targets of the BIFF, as the incidents in Shariff Saydona Mustapha in October demonstrated.

Countering gun-related, clan, and transition-induced violence

The martial law period saw a steep drop in conflict incidents and deaths in the ARMM as curfews were imposed, thorough inspections were made at checkpoints, and the police and military confiscated illegal weapons. Gun-related violence among civilians dropped, while extremist and rebel groups came under high pressure from security forces.

These gains could get fully overturned if no provisions to ensure the security of the Bangsamoro and surrounding communities are put in place. President Rodrigo Duterte's pronouncement of maintaining, even increasing, military presence in Mindanao and the Armed Forces' clarification that checkpoints would remain must be accompanied with a policy to ban civilians from carrying guns in public.⁸

If a nationally-mandated gun ban is not forthcoming, local governments

in the BARMM could issue their own. Parang, Maguindanao did this, issuing an ordinance declaring certain barangays as 'no-firearm' zones to stem gun-related violence, including rido. Recently, the Davao City government suspended private gun owners' permit to carry firearms outside their homes.⁹ It said this would deter crime and terrorism.

Authorities' illegal-weapon confiscations should continue but with the same assiduousness as

⁷ Carmela Fonbuena, Rappler, *Government wants MILF to give up more weapons*, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/239536-government-wants-milf-give-up-weapons> (accessed 14 December 2019)

⁸ Julie M. Aurelio, Inquirer.net, *Duterte wants 20 more battalions to fight terror groups*, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1198946/duterte-wants-20-more-battalions-to-fight-terror-groups> (accessed 13 December 2019); Melvin Gascon, Inquirer.net, *Mindanao checkpoints to stay even with ML lifted*, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1200814/mindanao-checkpoints-to-stay-even-with-ml-lifted> (accessed 13 December 2019)

⁹ Antonio L. Colina IV, MindaNews, *One-year gun ban imposed in Davao*, <https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2020/01/one-year-gun-ban-imposed-in-davao/> (accessed 11 January 2020)

during the martial law period. Confiscated weapons must be securely stored, then destroyed so these don't leak back to communities or to armed groups through the shadow market. These are important moves to reduce illegal weapons in use, especially as the MILF decommissions its troops and firearms.

Local governments should also kick conflict mediation and resolution into high gear, focusing on rido, in particular. Full support has to be extended to local bodies employing hybrid methods and having jurisdiction over – and even across – municipalities. Parang and the other Iranun towns of Buldon, Barira, and Matanog provide the example. Each of them has set up its own conflict mediation and resolution body and are members as well of the Iranun Reconciliation Council, which settles inter-municipality conflict, particularly rido.

The Marawi rebuilding process needs to be closely monitored for any gaps, decisions or actions that could result in conflict and violence. The vigilance of stakeholders, such as the Marawi Reconstruction Conflict Watch (MRCW), has become more important than ever now that the construction of new structures has begun.¹⁰ Many issues need to be watched but more importantly: the pace of rebuilding, actual versus planned projects, land conflicts due to competing ownership



A transitory shelter in Marawi City.

Photo by Maureen Lacuesta/
International Alert Philippines

claims, the return of displaced families to their properties within the MAA, and construction of a new military camp. In Congress, a compensation bill for Marawi war victims needs champions and to be passed into law.

Transparency will help engender trust in the Marawi rebuilding process as well as in the BARMM transition process. As recruitment for various positions in the BARMM goes underway, transparency in hiring qualifications and decisions becomes imperative. Favoritism, particularly of MILF members, will be readily apparent.

Among MILF leaders, asking their members to exercise restraint is also imperative, as MILF members begin to make claims on resources, particularly land. This will ease tensions and conflicts with residents who have prior ownership claims.

¹⁰ Task Force Bangon Marawi, *New Marawi structures in pipeline*, <http://bangonmarawi.com/2019/12/16/new-marawi-public-structures-in-pipeline-2/> (accessed 13 January 2020)

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.

