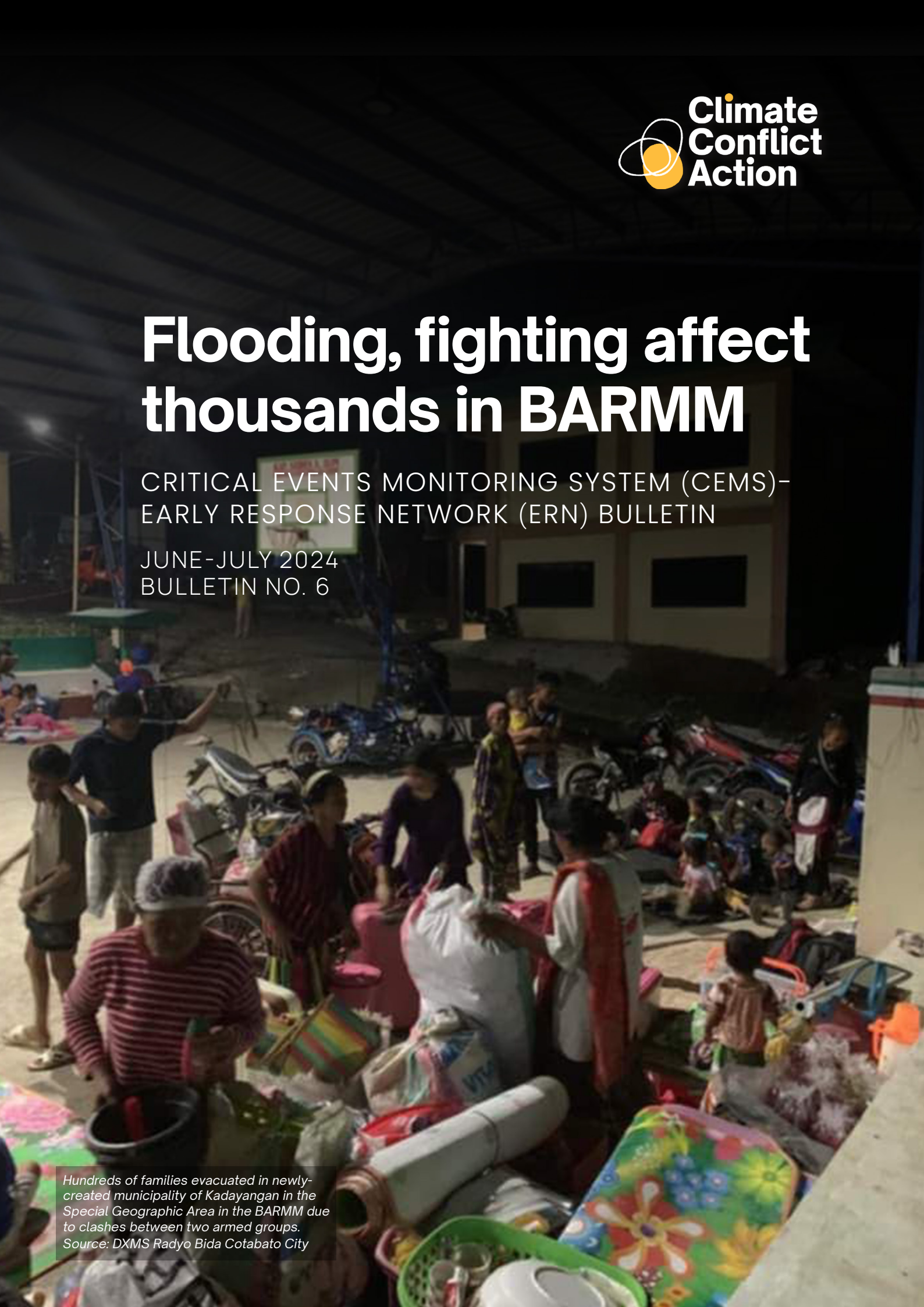


Flooding, fighting affect thousands in BARMM

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

JUNE-JULY 2024
BULLETIN NO. 6

A photograph showing a large group of people, including men, women, and children, gathered in an outdoor shelter area. They are surrounded by their belongings, such as bags, blankets, and rolled-up mats. Some people are sitting on the ground, while others are standing and talking. The background shows a simple building with windows and a sign that partially reads "KADAYANGAN".

*Hundreds of families evacuated in newly-created municipality of Kadayangan in the Special Geographic Area in the BARMM due to clashes between two armed groups.
Source: DXMS Radyo Bida Cotabato City*

The past two months were devastating for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), with hundreds of thousands displaced by heavy rains and thunderstorms. Low-lying areas and those near rivers and tributaries were flooded. Coupled with strong winds, the torrent destroyed crops and infrastructure in Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur, and Basilan. These were areas that had just emerged from months of drought due to El Niño.

More than 110,000 families from 361 barangays were affected by the floods by the end of July.¹ Most of them sought shelter outside of evacuation centers because these structures might keep them safe from floods, but these would also make them a target for warring groups.

The extreme weather events they suffered heightened the double burden of BARMM's citizens to climate change and recurring conflict. This highlights the need for urgent and appropriate action from the region's leaders as people's vulnerability to flooding must not make them susceptible to armed fighting.

Fighting between and among MILF, BIFF, and other armed groups spur more evacuations

June began with another round of evacuations, with residents of Brgy. Pimbalakan in Mamasapano town, Maguindanao del Sur, fleeing their homes on June 3 after the departure of military forces sparked fears of possible clashes between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). The two warring groups had been already mediated by the authorities, but this was not enough reassurance for residents who feared that the conflict would be reignited after the military had left.

This was followed by a string of shooting incidents in Datu Piang and in Mamasapano again. The municipality had been experiencing armed fighting between the MILF and the BIFF, and between and among the MILF, since April.

By June 11, the Commission on Human Rights had been prompted to call for swift action from the local and national government to protect the 6,000 residents in Maguindanao del Sur who had been displaced by fighting.²

Eight days later, however, an encounter between the followers of two MILF commanders who had been fighting for control of strategic areas in Brgy. Meta, Datu Unsay (Mamasapano's neighboring town) led to one dead and at least two houses razed. Nearly 400 residents fled, seeking shelter in flooded evacuation centers. That they chose to stay in inundated shelters instead of their homes during the downpour is telling of the scale of the violence that raged in Datu Unsay, and is a clear illustration of how this also makes them susceptible to fighting and being yet again targeted by armed men.

By June 24, authorities had intervened, but this was not enough as the fighting would spill over to neighboring Shariff Aguak, where a group led by another MILF commander fired shots at local officials who intended to deliver relief supplies to those displaced by the fighting in Datu Unsay. The continued displacement of residents has also given armed groups a new target: *ayuda* or relief assistance. Villagers said the perpetrators were averse to the officials' support for the police and military's anti-terror campaign. Only on July 9 would the Datu Unsay residents be able to return to their homes after the fighting between the MILF commanders was settled.

Meanwhile in newly-created Kadayangan municipality, which is part of the Special Geographic Area (SGA) that became part of BARMM in 2019, at least 818 households were displaced on June 27 when a commander of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)

¹ National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council. <https://monitoring-dashboard.ndrrmc.gov.ph/page/reports/combined-effects-of-southwest-monsoon-and-tcs-butchoy-and-carina-2024>. 26 August 2024.

² Statement of the Commission on Human Rights calling for immediate action to ensure the safety of 6,000 displaced individuals in Maguindanao del Sur. 11 June 2024. <https://chr.gov.ph/statement-of-the-commission-on-human-rights-calling-for-immediate-action-to-ensure-the-safety-of-6000-displaced-individuals-in-maguindanao-del-sur/>

was shot dead, with a barangay chairman in Midsayap municipality adjacent to SGA-BARMM and his followers being the alleged perpetrators. This would lead to a few days of armed clashes between the followers of the two personalities, which ended with one of the followers of the MNLF commander getting killed.

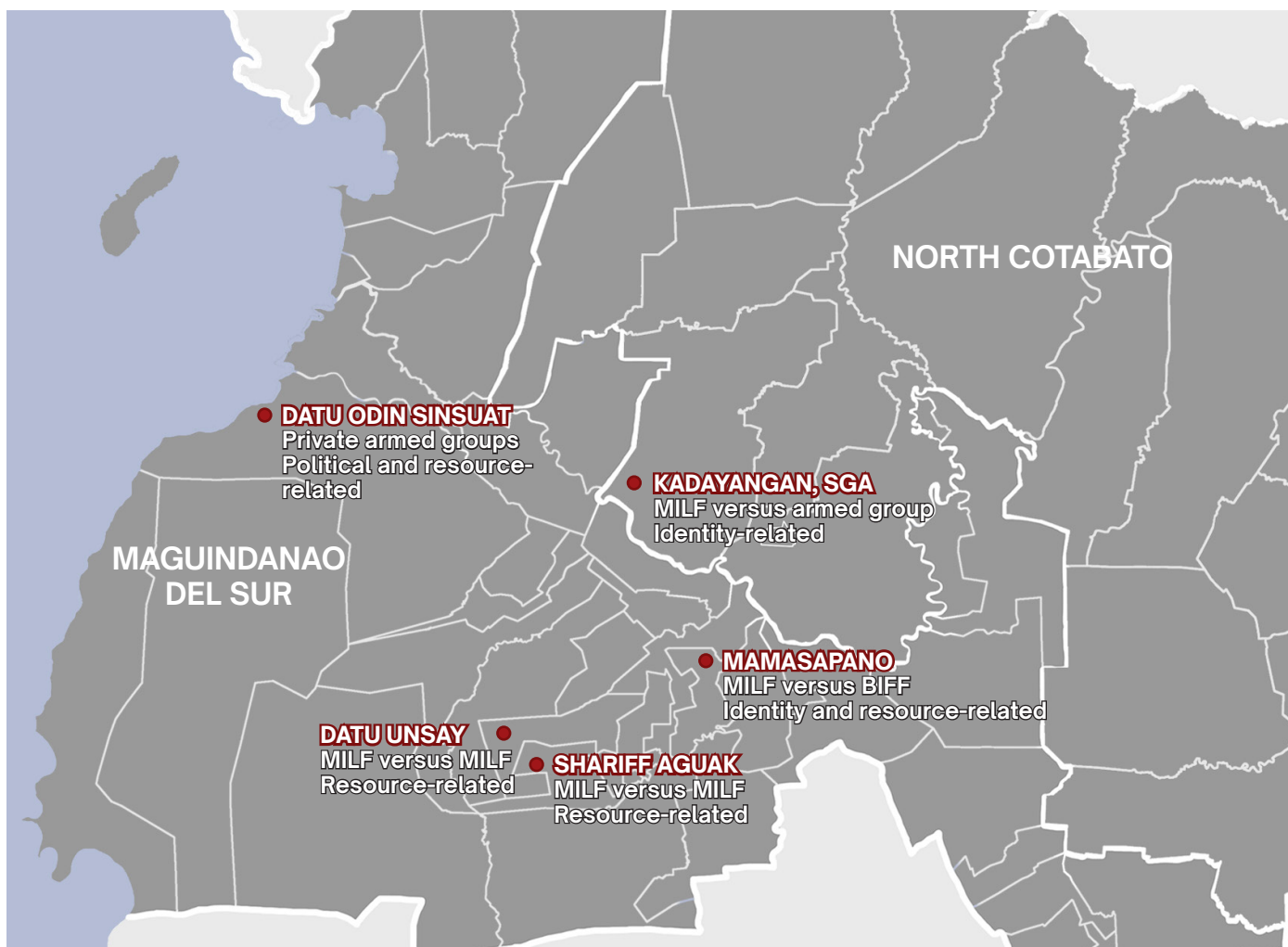
The feud was settled at the start of July, and displaced residents were given food packs a few days later. They had just recently returned to their homes too from the flooding that they had also experienced. Hundreds of residents more were forced to leave their homes, however, as fighting between two MILF factions occurred throughout the month. This was the sixth incident between the two parties, affecting barangays in Kadayangan and Nabalawag in SGA-BARMM, up to Midsayap in

Cotabato Province. It led to two deaths and the closure of a highway. By July 24, the military, local governments, and Ministry of Public Order and Safety were able to enforce a ceasefire.

Meanwhile, in Lanao del Sur, residents also had to flee when an armed clash erupted between two warring families in Picong municipality on June 6. Another firefight erupted 11 days later, this time in Malabang town, with the feud that was spurred by a killing before the 2022 elections between two families on one side, and one family on the other.

Note that residents of Maguindanao del Sur and Lanao del Sur also had to deal with massive flooding in late June, which recurred in both provinces. Maguindanao del Norte was also inundated in mid-July.

Municipalities where strings of violence have been recorded from June to July 2024.



Map produced by Council for Climate and Conflict Action Asia. September 2024.

These calamities, along with the presence of—and fighting among—armed groups, caused some 3,000 residents to flee their homes in Datu Odin Sinsuat (DOS) town, Maguindanao del Norte, beginning mid-July. The fighting stemmed from rivalries among political parties in various barangays in DOS, and it led to at least three dead and two others wounded, as well as a number of houses burned down. The scale was such that hundreds of soldiers backed by armored personnel carriers were deployed to contain the violence. With schools serving as evacuation centers, classes were canceled near the end of the month. Evacuees sheltering in resorts also feared that the armed groups would infiltrate the places where they had sought refuge—a concern which stems from armed groups historically having taken over land and territory in a battle of resources.

The fighting happened two months ahead of the supposed plebiscite for the creation of two municipalities that would be carved out of DOS: Datu Sinsuat Balabaran and Sheik Abas Hamza.³

At the end of July, the military were on their way to pacify a fight between the MILF and the MNLF in Sultan Kudarat province when they were fired upon by armed men. The soldiers returned fire, and the incident ended with two members of the MILF killed, as well as firearms confiscated from the MILF. Reportedly, there had not been any coordination between the military and the MILF's Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces when the former had responded to the clan war, which was contrary to protocol.



Teduray-Lambangian families seek refuge in an evacuation center after a series of armed encounters triggered by political conflict in Datu Odin Sinsuat. Photo: CCAA Photo Bank

Teduray woes: Assault, arson, and land grabbing

The Teduray-Lambangian non-Moro indigenous peoples (NMIP) were among those affected by the fighting in DOS in July. They had suffered one blow after another since May 24, when, in South Upi, Maguindanao del Sur, a Teduray who had been involved in a land dispute was assaulted. Two days later, another Teduray from the same municipality would find his home burned down, along with his farm animals and inputs, after having been displaced since August 2023 due to fighting between two MNLF members.

There have been multiple reports too of groups and individuals claiming rights over the parcels of land that is part of the Teduray-Lambangian's ancestral domain claim such as in Datu Blah Sinsuat and Datu Hoffer Ampatuan. These are further being legitimized through land surveys, proposed mineral reservations, and soil samplings being conducted by government agencies and ministries in the Bangsamoro.⁴ The NMIPs have repeatedly called to respect

³ In August, the Supreme Court ordered the Commission on Elections to desist from holding plebiscites in September and from performing any and all acts related to the ratification of the Bangsamoro Autonomy Act Nos. 53, 54, and 55. <https://sc.judiciary.gov.ph/sc-orders-comelec-to-halt-plebiscites-for-new-bangsamoro-municipalities/>

⁴ Geological mapping in the municipality of Datu Blah Sinsuat, Maguindanao del Norte. 14 July 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1210259756815046>

the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent in conducting these activities within their ancestral domain claim.

IPs were also victims of vertical violence with the killing of Emong Kantala, an IP Mandatory Representative in Sen. Ninoy Aquino municipality, Sultan Kudarat. A member of the Manobo Dulangan Tribe, he had reportedly mediated for the surrender of some members of the NPA in the area before his death.

Shootings, violent extremism persist

Shootings also persisted in June and July, with a number of them apparently politically-driven as the filing of the candidacies for the 2025 elections looms near. Shootings were most pervasive in Cotabato City and Maguindanao del Sur.

It is worth noting that in DOS, eight employees and a director of the Bangsamoro Board of Investments were ambushed on July 10, with a barangay chairman being the target. The ambush occurred days before fighting broke out among supporters of different political parties in DOS, which would drive 3,000 residents away from their homes.

A volunteer of the United Bangsamoro Justice Party, which is affiliated with the MILF, was also killed in July in Cotabato City. In June, a barangay captain from Datu Salibo municipality, Maguindanao del Sur, was killed, while a Sangguniang Kabataan official survived being shot in Sultan Kudarat province.

Violent extremism remained a threat, with the military continuing its surveillance of Butig municipality in Lanao del Sur in early June due to the presence of the Dawlah Islamiya (DI) and the New People's Army (NPA). They expanded their operations to other municipalities in Lanao del Sur in July, as well as to Lanao del Norte, Cotabato Province, and Maguindanao del Norte.

DI members were spotted in Pagayawan municipality, Lanao del Sur, in mid-June. In mid-July, a member of the MILF who was allegedly working with the DI was arrested in Marawi City. A few days later, the DI would attack a military detachment in Shariff Saydona Mustapha town, Maguindanao del Sur, killing one soldier and wounding another. The military would then pursue DI members who supposedly attacked soldiers who had been assisting flood victims in Datu Salibo.

Crackdown on smuggled cigarettes, illegal drugs, and illicit weapons

June and July saw large-scale confiscations of smuggled goods. At least 123.5 million pesos' worth of cigarettes were recovered during various anti-smuggling operations, with the biggest amount found in Zamboanga City, followed by Sulu, then Maguindanao del Norte. That smuggling has thrived in Sulu is ironic in that recent data released by the Philippine Statistics Authority showed poverty incidence in the province dropping dramatically from 75 percent in 2018 to 13 percent in 2023. Among the provinces in BARMM, this was the biggest reduction in poverty.⁵

Authorities recovered smuggled cigarettes in other parts of BARMM, as well as in SOCCSKSARGEN, Northern Mindanao, and Zamboanga Peninsula.⁶ The same regions, particularly in the porous borders of the island provinces, saw the persistence of the illegal drug trade, with authorities confiscating 52.9 million pesos' worth of illegal drugs.

Also worth noting is that raids solely against illicit weapons had been recorded in June and July. This could be a deliberate effort by the government to curb illegal firearms, ahead of the 2025 elections.

One of these operations was conducted by the police on June 22, which resulted in the death of a barangay chairman in Balabagan

⁵ 2023 FY Official Poverty Statistics Publication 15 August 2024. <https://psa.gov.ph/content/11-out-18-regions-recorded-significant-decreases-poverty-incidence-2023>

⁶ By mid-June, the Philippine National Police (PNP) ordered a crackdown on fake and smuggled cigarettes, with stricter border controls among the actions that would be taken.

town, Lanao del Sur. Institutions including the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity (OPAPRU) and local governments are also strengthening their programs to curb illicit firearms, starting with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding and ceremonial turnover of firearms under the Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Management Program in Basilan.

Conclusion

As global warming worsens, more extreme weather events are expected to occur in BARMM. The natural disasters that occurred in recent months showed how climate change impacts made communities vulnerable to clashes, as well as how flooding, in particular, displaced communities, therefore making them more susceptible to fighting. These provide evidence and links to climate-conflict corridors that must be examined deeper.

In the coming months, it is crucial for government and humanitarian agencies to mobilize early response in the face of the community's dual vulnerability to climate change and conflict. Note that while some of the violent incidents mentioned in this report ended with some sense of normalcy, these lulls in conflict are expected to be temporary, especially since some of the clashes recorded were recurring ones which erupted months ago. How can authorities ensure that once settlements are reached, the parties commit to avoiding conflict moving forward?

In the SGA in particular, the regional government also has the responsibility of being interim administrator of all 63 barangays, despite the appointment of the officers-in-charge (OIC) in the SGA's eight municipalities. This contributes to the delayed response to violence in the SGA. Immediate installation of municipal structures and systems will provide faster deployment of response during crises.

Quick action must likewise be taken to address the increase in the targeting of NMIPs. These violent incidents affecting the Teduray-Lambangian tribe, in particular, call into question the seriousness of BARMM leadership in promoting NMIP rights, especially their rights to their ancestral land.

Sadly, further displacement among the vulnerable groups involving women, youth, and the NMIPs is expected in the Maguindanao provinces as the conflict involving the MILF, BIFF, and other armed groups continues. It is alarming that violence has raged in what has historically been the stronghold of the MILF, who now make up the leadership of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority.

Finally, attention must also be given to cross-border illicit trade, which has also been tied to the expansion of violent extremism as in the past. The notable increase in illicit trade in the island provinces must be closely monitored, especially in places such as Sulu, which ironically had the highest decrease in poverty incidence from 2018. ●

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 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 action, peacebuilding, and development.

