

Philippines: Marawi Crisis - Philippine army battles to contain Isis attacks from spreading to Iligan City

Tuesday 30 May 2017, by [HOLMES Oliver](#) (Date first published: 30 May 2017).

Curfews and heavy military presence in Iligan, a city of 350,000, amid fears Islamist militants may seek to expand conflict.

Attention: in times of Martial Law, journalists depend mostly on official military sources. Readers must take into account this objective situation. ESSF staff.

Police and security services have imposed a night-time curfew and increased their presence in a second Philippine city following reports that Islamist militants fighting fierce battles in Marawi might pose as civilians to sneak out and open a new front.

More than 90% of Marawi's 200,000 population have fled a week of street clashes and aerial strikes. Many have relocated to Iligan City, 38km (24 miles) to the north, where authorities have implemented a 10pm to 4am curfew.

Posting on the city's Facebook page, police had said curfews were not a complete lockdown but "containment action" - using both stationary and mobile checkpoints as well as "police visibility to negate the occurrence of same incident at Marawi City".

The extended curfew followed comments from Colonel Alex Aduca, chief of the Fourth Mechanised Infantry Battalion, who told local radio that some rebels had been caught trying to get into Iligan.

"We don't want what's happening in Marawi to spill over in Iligan," he said.

A spokesperson for the provincial government of Lanao del Sur also said the army had arrested a suspected militant trying to flee Marawi. The man, who was in his 20s, had fingers smelling "of gunpowder", Zia Alonto Adiong said.

The spokesperson encouraged residents to help the military by conducting citizen's arrests of suspected members of the Maute, the Islamic State-linked group that took control of several neighbourhoods of Marawi last Tuesday.

"If anybody thinks that he or she is physically capable of apprehending a member of the Maute, then do so. Bring that criminal to us and we will do the necessary actions," he said.

Security forces have made efforts to contain much of the wider region. Police as well as soldiers, in camouflage and carrying assault rifles, searched trucks and checked ID cards at two checkpoints between Iligan and the provincial international airport.

More than 60 militants, 20 security forces personnel and 19 civilians have been killed since Maute

rebels flooded through Marawi, a lakeside city in the centre of Mindanao, a semi-autonomous province home to several insurgent factions.

While on-off fighting is common in the island state of 22 million, the overnight rampage by an Isis-linked group and its ability to hold ground for a week in defiance of military attack helicopters and artillery barrages presents a dramatic turn.

President Rodrigo Duterte has imposed martial law in the area and told troops that he will protect them if they commit abuses during the conflict, including rape, leading to an outcry from rights activists and some lawmakers.

The clashes started after security forces tried to capture Isnilon Hapilon, an Islamist militant leader who is the subject of a \$5m FBI reward and endorsed by Isis, which seeks to establish a presence outside the Middle East. He is believed to be a senior leader in a coalition of Islamist insurgent groups, including the Maute.

Rebels struck back surprisingly swiftly, quickly taking up sniper positions that have since bogged down the military's efforts to completely retake the city.

Major General Rolando Bautista, the commander who ordered the raid, said insurgents had been planning for several weeks to seize Marawi, and the raid "triggered" their attack early.

"We did not expect the outcome, the reactions," Bautista told local news outlet Rappler [1], suggesting the militants had been well-prepared.

The Maute group remained in nine of the city's 96 subdistricts, according to the military. Thousands of civilians remain stranded in the crossfire and bombardment, with little food or water and no electricity.

The bodies of eight people, said by the army to be civilians executed by the Maute were found in a ravine on Sunday. Most had been shot in the head and some had their hands tied.

Oliver Holmes in Iligan City, Philippines

Reuters contributed to this report

* *The Guardian*. Tuesday 30 May 2017 06.15 BST Last modified on Tuesday 30 May 2017 07.07 BST: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/30/philippine-army-battles-to-contain-isis-attacks-from-spreading-to-second-city>

Foreign fighters killed in battle for Philippine city

Malaysians, Indonesian, and possibly Arabs killed after fierce fight for the southern city of Marawi.

The Philippine military chief says three Malaysians, an Indonesian, and possibly Arab fighters have been killed in a southern city that armed groups planned to burn entirely in an audacious plot to project the lethal influence of ISIL.

General Eduardo Ano told The Associated Press in an interview on Tuesday the military has made advances in containing the week-long siege of Marawi city. He said a top Filipino fighters is believed to have been killed and the leader of the attack was wounded.

Ano said the group plotted to set Marawi ablaze and kill as many Christians in nearby Iligan city on Ramadan to mimic the violence seen by the world in Syria and Iraq.

The army insists the drawn-out fight is not a true sign of the group's strength, and the military has held back to spare civilians' lives.

"They are weak," Ano said of the gunmen, speaking at a hospital where wounded soldiers were being treated. "It's just a matter of time for us to clear them from all their hiding places."

As of Tuesday morning, he said the military working house-by-house had cleared 70 percent of the city and the remaining fighters were isolated.

Still, the fighters have turned out to be remarkably well-armed and resilient.

Attack helicopters were streaking low over Marawi on Monday, firing rockets at hideouts, as heavily armed soldiers went house to house.

The gunmen have held the Philippine army at bay, burning buildings, taking at least a dozen hostages and sending tens of thousands of residents fleeing.

Ano said Tuesday that the commander, Isnilon Hapilon, is still hiding somewhere in the city. Authorities were working to confirm that another leader had been killed.

President Rodrigo Duterte declared martial law in the south through mid-July after the fighters went on a deadly rampage in Marawi last week following an unsuccessful military raid to capture Hapilon.

In recent years, small armed groups in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia have begun unifying under the banner of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Jose Calida, the top Philippine prosecutor, said last week that the violence on the large southern island of Mindanao "is no longer a rebellion of Filipino citizens".

Rohan Gunaratna, a security expert at Singapore's S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said ISIL and the smaller regional groups are working together to show their strength and declare a Philippine province part of the caliphate that ISIL says it created in the Middle East.

He said the fighting in Marawi, along with smaller battles elsewhere in the southern Philippines, may be precursors to declaring a province, which would be "a huge success for the terrorists".

Last week, two suicide bombings in Jakarta, Indonesia, killed three police officers, an attack claimed by ISIL. While Indonesia has been battling local fighters since 2002, the rise of ISIL has breathed new life into those networks and raised concern about the risk of Indonesian fighters returning home from the Middle East.

Analysts have warned that as ISIL is weakened in Syria and Iraq, battered by years of American-led attacks, Mindanao could become a focal point for regional fighters.

Southeast Asian fighters fleeing the Middle East "could look to Mindanao to provide temporary refuge as they work their way home", said a report late last year by the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, predicting a high risk of regional violence.

Marawi is regarded as the heartland of the Islamic faith on Mindanao island.

Muslim rebels have been waging a separatist rebellion in the south of the predominantly Roman Catholic nation for decades. The largest armed group dropped its secessionist demands in 1996, when it signed an autonomy deal with the Philippine government. Amid continuing poverty and other social ills, restiveness among minority Muslims has continued.

Hapilon is an Islamic preacher and former commander of the Abu Sayyaf group who pledged allegiance to ISIL in 2014. He now heads an alliance of at least 10 smaller groups, including the Maute.

Acmad Aliponto, a 56-year-old court sheriff who decided not to flee the city, said while the fighters were well-armed, he believes they have little local support, and that the recent violence could turn more people against them.

"In the end their relatives and everyday people may be the ones who will kill them," he said. "Look at what they did. So many were affected."

Al Jazeera

Source: AP news agency

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<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/foreign-fighters-killed-battle-philippine-city-170530022319686.html>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/171245-marawi-crisis-isis-plan-bautista>