

Marawi (Mindanao): Filipino Muslim saves 64 Christians from execution by Islamist militants

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Norodin Alonto Lucman says the militants would get to them 'over his dead body'.

A Muslim man has been hailed as a hero in the Philippines after he hid 64 Christians from Islamist militants hunting them on the Filipino island of Mindanao.

A group of heavily-armed gunmen from the Maute, stormed the city of Marawi on the island last week and have been engaged in fierce fighting with the Filipino army.

The group which also calls itself the Islamic State of Lanao, is reportedly backed by Isis and have been targeting Christians.

The militants had reportedly been planning to set up their own Islamist enclave on the island, officials said after the emergence of a video showing their leaders in a secret strategy meeting.

Although 90 per cent of Filipinos identify as Christian, Mindanao - at the very south of the country - is majority Muslim and has been a target for Islamist insurgents for years.

President Rodrigo Duterte, who was previously mayor of Davao City on the island, has declared martial law and sent the army to retake the city leading to over a week of fighting in the streets.

Around 90 per cent of the population, 180,000 people, have already fled the fighting but some have been unable to escape.

Norodin Alonto Lucman, a Muslim former politician and traditional clan leader, opened his home to around 71 people, including 64 Christians, when they could not escape.

Mr Lucman said Christians "couldn't leave the city, so I had to take responsibility in protecting them."

"The following days, other Christian workers took refuge in my house. There were about 64 of them in my hands and I was very determined that nothing happens to them", he added.

He said the militants would only get to them "over my dead body".

Mr Lucman was later able to march them to safety outside the city by waving white flags. When fighters stopped them and asked if they were Christians, they responded with "Allahu akbar" - a Muslim rallying cry - and were allowed to leave.

He said they had been forced to escape because they were getting close to starvation.

He described a scene of devastation in the town centre and said the streets were strewn with rotting corpses and debris.

"I almost puked as we were walking", he said, estimating that there were more than 1,000 dead.

Official government estimates put the death toll at 120 militants, 38 government forces and 20 civilians.

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Additional reporting by Reuters

P.S.

* The Independent Online. Wednesday 7 June 2017 22:35 BST:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/philippines-muslim-saves-64-christians-islamic-militants-marawi-rodrigo-duterte-abu-sayyaf-a7777351.html>