

Philippines: First Duterte crushed Marawi, now he is ignoring it

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Failure to aid rehabilitation effort has set Mindanao back decades

Six months after the end of the 2017 battle of Marawi in the southern Philippines, residents were allowed into ground zero for just a few hours to retrieve whatever they could of their possessions destroyed in the five months of fighting and bombing. But they could not return, until today, to their ruined lakeside city, to pick up the pieces of their lives.

Over time, this officially Islamic city in the southern island of Mindanao has turned into a surreal desert of rubble, where vegetation has slowly crept through the shattered houses. Among the few living things were patches of eggplants, squash, tomatoes; an outgrowth of green covered a section of the battle area once occupied by houses.

For more than three years now, the painful memories of that battle, the longest and largest seen in decades of Muslim insurgency, have gradually receded. The gaping wound that remains is the fate of the shrinking land of Muslim Mindanao in this Catholic-majority country.

It turns out that Manila's promises to rebuild and rehabilitate were mostly empty. After first offering a grand plan to turn the ruins into something akin to Dubai, the task force overseeing the former battle area of 250 hectares has moved at a snail's pace and has achieved little more than setting up some maritime outposts by the shore. The few mosques that have been rebuilt were completed thanks to private donors.

President Rodrigo Duterte was telling the truth when he taunted the rebels to, "go ahead, do it," prior to the attack on Marawi. Two millennial brothers of the Maute family, from their hideout in a godforsaken town south of Marawi City, had aligned themselves with Islamic State and recruited hundreds of youths with the promise of creating a new province. They were all killed in the battle, which saw over 1,000 people killed.

All hopes of improving the miserable situation of the nearly 50,000 families who lost their homes have now fallen on the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, or BARMM, that was created in early 2019.

But it too had a slow start in forming a parliament mainly hand-picked by Duterte to make laws in five Muslim-dominated provinces, nearly all considered to be the poorest in the country. Its leaders kept their distance from the task force in the Marawi aftermath, wary of being drawn into allegations of corruption and lack of transparency.

More than anything, the aftereffects of the battle are threatening to explode the ancient issues of land ownership that has been the core grievance raised by generations of minority Muslim Filipinos. With only half of the displaced families able to show registered titles, those who could not "will be left to their own devices ticking toward future neighborhood disagreements, if not *rido*," according

to a recent BARMM summary report.

Rido is the violent outcome of clan feuds that can erupt at any time; in fact, people thought the Battle of Marawi was just another clan feud when it first erupted, not realizing that it would lead to a siege involving battalions of government troops to defeat pro-ISIS rebels.

As an afterthought perhaps, BARMM has decided to enter the fray, carving out a budget of 517 million pesos (\$11 million) for 2021 for Marawi's rehabilitation efforts. Otherwise, it risked losing the ability to restore governance where others failed before them. It also allotted a further 500 million pesos in 2020, partly to aid victims of the COVID pandemic but mostly for the rehabilitation effort, but is still awaiting reports from field offices as to how the funds were distributed.

The BARMM is racing against time already squandered by a national government that had sweeping powers — but failed to use them — to put Marawi back together under a Mindanao-wide martial law that lasted until the end of 2019.

That would have relieved BARMM of the heavy responsibility of putting Marawi back on its feet. According to BARMM's confidential summary report "families feel defeated, and they could only swallow their *maratabat*, or pride, because everyone else is drowned by the insensitivity and slow progress of the rehabilitation." The failure of the task force could now mean going back to the old power structures, with Mindanao racked once again by warlords, ethnic divides, poverty, and violence.

Two things could have got the ball rolling in practical terms: first, by seeding enough fresh capital to fire the entrepreneurial skills that the Maranao tribe of Marawi is known for, those successful business owners who expanded the city into a commercial hub; second, by decentralizing the main city, and spreading people to nearby towns according to the idea of "build it and they shall come." Local politicians stopped before it could take off because of petty differences with rival political families.

Today, the only real progress is a major road network fanning out from the former battle area, which is being built thanks to funding from Japan. Earlier this year, the public highways department approved plans for promenades, a market and other structures with grants from China.

But there again, there have been interminable delays, with some projects still awaiting approval and others bogged down in squabbles over procurement. At this rate, it seems the wild greens in the ruins are moving faster than the bureaucracy.

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