

Mindanao: Martial Law Declared in Southern Philippines; churchgoers taken hostage

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The firefight has left three dead and 12 others injured.

Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte on Tuesday declared martial law in southern Mindanao province as fighting between the army and militants linked to the Islamic State broke out in Marawi City.

Duterte's spokesman Ernesto Abella made the announcement in Moscow, where the president is on an official visit.

"The President has called me and asked me to announce that as of 10 p.m., Manila time, he has already declared Martial law to the entire island of Mindanao," Abella said. "This is on the grounds of resistance and rebellion based on what is happening," he said, adding that martial law would last for 60 days, as stipulated in the Constitution.

The ongoing clash in Marawi City is aimed at neutralizing militant group Abu Sayyaf's leader Isnilon Hapilon, who is reportedly the representative of the Islamic State group in the Philippines.

Hapilon was spotted along with an estimated 15 fully armed members of the Maute group in the area earlier. The Maute group, which is also known as the Islamic State of Lanao, has reportedly received support from ISIS. Last year, reports said that Hapilon brought some of his Abu Sayyaf insurgents to Marawi City to allegedly join the Maute Group, according to The Philippine Star newspaper.

The fighting erupted on Tuesday afternoon when the Maute group opened fire on personnel from the military's 103rd Brigade, a police director said.

Two soldiers and one policeman were reported killed, while 12 others were injured during the fight, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said. "As of tonight (Tuesday, May 23), the Maute group burned several facilities - the church, city jail, the Ninoy Aquino School and the Dansalan College. The Maute fighters still occupy also the main street of Marawi city called the Quezon Street and two bridges," Lorenzana said.

A Philippine Roman Catholic church leader says a priest and several churchgoers have been taken hostage from a cathedral by gunmen in a southern city.

On Wednesday Archbishop Socrates Villegas, president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines and another church official said on Wednesday that gunmen forced their way into a cathedral in Marawi city and seized the Reverend Chito Suganob and more than a dozen churchgoers and staff as fighting raged between government troops and Muslim militants.

Villegas said the gunmen have threatened to kill the hostages "if government forces unleashed

against them are not recalled.” The Archbishop asked Filipinos to pray for the captives and for the government to make their safety a primary concern.

Marawi City residents were urged to stay home as fights continued on city streets between Maute fighters and soldiers. “I’m appealing to residents of Marawi City to stay home, drop on the ground if they hear gunshots. They have to lock their doors and gates too,” Mamintal Adiong Jr, the governor of the Lanao del Sur province, told The Philippine Star.

Brigadier General Rolando Bautista, commander of the Philippines’ First Infantry Division, said security forces were trying to locate the militants. “Based on our assessment right now there are more or less 100 divided into groups of 10 in different locations,” he told news channel ANC.

Duterte canceled a meeting set for Wednesday with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. Abella said Duterte will cut his trip and fly to Manila “as soon as possible.”

The Marawi fighting came weeks after the military foiled a mass kidnapping attempt by the Abu Sayyaf on Philippines’ central Bohol island.

In March, Duterte pleaded for help from mayors in Muslim areas of the south of the country to deal with Islamist militants, and threatened to impose martial law there if the problem was not tackled.

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<http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Martial-Law-Declared-in-Southern-Philippines-After-Battle-with-Islamic-State-Group-20170523-0014.html>

Duterte declares martial law after Mindanao attack

Emergency declaration follows heavy clashes between security forces and fighters in Mindanao’s Marawi city.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has declared martial law on the southern island of Mindanao after about 100 Muslim fighters laid siege to a major city following a deadly gun battle with government forces.

The emergency declaration took immediate effect and will last for 60 days, according to presidential spokesman Ernesto Abella, who made the announcement on Tuesday from Russia, where Duterte was on a scheduled four-day official visit.

The president “has already declared martial law for the entire island of Mindanao”, Abella said.

“This is possible on the grounds of the existence of rebellion,” he added.

Duterte cut short his trip to Russia, Foreign Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano said. “The president feels that he is needed in Manila as soon as possible.”

Duterte met Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday night rather than Thursday as planned,

according to Russian state media.

The president said on Wednesday martial law could last a year as he vowed it would be similar to the late Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship.

“To those who have experienced martial law, it would not be any different from what president [Ferdinand] Marcos did,” Duterte said. “I’ll be harsh.”

“If it would take a year to do it, if it’s over within a month, then I’d be happy,” Duterte said in a video posted online by the government.

Two soldiers and one police officer were killed in the firefight in the city of Marawi, 816km south of Manila, while 12 government forces were wounded, Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said.

The attackers reportedly burned a Catholic church, the city jail, and two schools, as well as occupied the main streets and two bridges leading to the city of more than 200,000 people, Lorenzana added.

Gunmen also occupied city hall, a state-run hospital, and part of a university compound, he said.

“The whole of Marawi city is blacked out, there is no light and there are [rebel] snipers all around,” Lorenzana told a press conference in Russia’s capital, Moscow.

The hostilities in Marawi began when troops raided an apartment where fighters were reportedly meeting, according army spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Jo-ar Herrera.

Loyal to ISIL

The gunmen were suspected members of two armed groups - Abu Sayyaf and Maute - which have pledged allegiance to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS), Herrera said.

In the raid, security forces were targeting Isnilon Hapilon, an Abu Sayyaf leader.

Photos posted on social media by Marawi residents showed armed men roaming the city with the black flags of ISIL.

“Please pray for us here,” said Mohammad Abedin, president of the Lanao Del Sur Medical Society in Marawi. “We can see houses burning and we don’t have electricity now.”

Lorenzana said additional forces would be deployed to Marawi on Wednesday.

Military chief General Eduardo Ano urged Marawi residents to stay indoors as fighting continued.

“Don’t go out, lock your doors and windows until our troops clear the area,” he said in an interview with a Manila radio station from Moscow. “We have enough troops on the ground.”

Both Abu Sayyaf and Maute have been blamed for bombings, attacks against government forces, and kidnappings in the Philippines. They have also beheaded hostages .

Abu Sayyaf decapitated an elderly German early this year and two Canadians last year after ransom demands were not met.

It has also been blamed for the country’s worst attacks, including the 2004 bombing of a ferry in Manila Bay that claimed more than 100 lives.

Security analysts said Hapilon has been trying to unite various Muslim armed groups that have professed allegiance to ISIL.

Hapilon reportedly has been chosen to lead an ISIL branch in Southeast Asia and is on the US Department of Justice list of “most-wanted terrorists” worldwide, with a reward of up to \$5m for his capture.

Ano said Hapilon is still recovering from wounds sustained in a military air strike in January.

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<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/duterte-declares-martial-law-mindanao-attack-170523171932275.html>

Source: News agencies
