

Mindanao (Philippines): The Marawi Solidarity Campaign - A brief update

Sunday 3 September 2017, by [ESSF](#), [ROUSSET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 13 August 2017).

We will furnish a more complete report on the solidarity campaign for Marawi in September [this piece is written mi-August].

To this day **13 000€ were sent by ESSF** to the coalition of associations, MiHands.

To this day too, the fighting is still ongoing, now coming to more than 2-1/2 months after the conflict began on 23rd May 2017. The city has been intensely bombarded, buildings hit one after another, in order to drive out the snipers of the Maute jihadist group. The destruction has been extensive.

The fighting is concentrated today in a reduced area of the city. The University of Marawi has reopened. However, removing people back in the « pacified » areas is not evident in itself. Thus, a march of Maranaw women was organized to demand for their return, but the initiative was blocked by the army. The residents are afraid that it is not only for reasons of security (explosives...). Very rich clans live in Marawi where drug trafficking in particular abounds. Gold that has been hoarded and high-quality armaments were left in their houses. The Maute group certainly served themselves and most likely, the military too.

Beyond the battle of Marawi, the conditions for a long-lasting conflict seem to converge. The jihadist Salafist groups have probably gained an attractive power over young people and are quite capable of recruiting – they have high caliber arms and financial resources. The army can profit from a situation of creeping war ; it receives military aid from the United States, will benefit from a higher budget and increase its troops. For their part, in the framework of existing agreements, the United States are showing that they are capable of furnishing a multiform military aid that neither China nor Russia can actually offer. President Duterte maintains the possibility of extending to other regions martial law now in vigor in all the island of Mindanao (presently, the military high command does not wish that said martial law be imposed all over the country).

The victimized population of this major crisis does not have a say in what is going on. It is held hostage by a conflict between armed groups and the army. The Moros are treated as suspects. In the Philippines, carrying with you your identity documents is not the rule if you do not drive a car or travel abroad.... The « displaced persons » (IDPs) have difficulties therefore to pass through the military control posts. They risk finding themselves detained in the official reception centers, under surveillance, if they have not been able to find refuge with relatives. In the province of Tarlac, the authorities propose to require obligatory identity cards only for Muslims – while this province is situated in the northern part of the country, some 1500 km from Marawi !

Consequently, solidarity must come within a long-term perspective and create persistently the conditions for an active intercommunity cooperation to fight discrimination, withdrawal, fear (see preceding articles).

When the Maranaw families fled the fighting, they thought of coming back to their homes a few days

later and brought almost nothing with them. This is why they lack everything in general, from kitchen utensils to what is needed when giving birth. With the passing of time, emergency food aid no longer suffices and fresh foods are needed.

Most of the population sought refuge with relatives in other places in Mindanao and beyond, in the other regions of the archipelago. In the province of Lanao del Sur (where Marawi is the capital city), the IDPs are essentially confined to official reception centers that are controlled by the army. The biggest contingent of refugees are found in the province of Lanao del Norte. It is there where MiHands carried on most of their efforts. MiHands operates on a daily basis in Iligan, the main city of Lanao del Norte, but also on the border between the two Lanao provinces (north and south), in some remotest municipalities. The member organizations of this coalition plan to extend their actions geographically, but without doubling initiatives of other networks already effectively intervening in Cagayan de Oro for instance (province of Misamis Oriental).

MiHands receives aid for IDPs in the form of cash (collected in the Philippines), material packs, or bank transfers sent by national as well as international networks. MiHands works in a « hand to mouth » way. As soon as aid is received, it is immediately distributed to families in need.

All the solidarity actions conducted by the member associations of this coalition are in fact officially registered with the administrative bodies assigned to make an inventory of aid given to victims of the Marawi conflict. However, this does not protect MiHands from being subjected to the pressure of the martial law regime that has been imposed all over the island.

Not only can the delivery of aid be slowed down considerably by the multiplication of military control posts, but the army also finds « suspect » all independent militant activities, putting them under surveillance. Now, popular networks engaged in assisting displaced populations are witnesses of human rights violations and get to protect the victims. They consider that this is part of their humanitarian work.

A case was particularly reported to me. A psychologically unstable person, incapable of putting up to an aggressive interrogation, was tortured (cigarette burns particularly) before being released, as the military men realized that his admissions and declarations were too incoherent. However, they did not want him to give evidence. Since his release, he needed to be protected, meaning, transfer houses frequently - with his family- knowing that the «forces of order » could find him and trace the humanitarian organizations helping him. The task of assisting has a high cost (rent of apartments, maintenance of the family), and it is also risky.

Massive food and material help have been coming into Mindanao where many agencies intervene. Less numerous (and in general with fewer resources) are the networks having a « global » approach of humanitarian action and its different dimensions : « daily needs» certainly (food, hygiene...), but also psychological, paramedical, adapted to children, facilitating social reconstitution and insertions, preserving or redeveloping solidarity (particularly intercommunity), defending victims' rights.... All things which are possible only through proximity and which imply sustained militant activity.

Pierre Rousset
ESSF

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