

Philippines. 'A failure': Marawi verdict on Duterte ahead of annual address

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As Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte prepares to deliver his annual "State of the Nation" address on Monday, a group of residents from Marawi are planning a counter-event to hand down their verdict on what they say is the government's failure to rebuild a city that was devastated in a siege with armed rebels two years ago.

Duterte promised to help Marawi refugees "rise and move forward", but tens of thousands of them are still without permanent shelter and unable to return to their homes, Drieza Lininding, chairman of the Moro Consensus Group, told Al Jazeera.

"For us, the president is a failure in many aspects of the Marawi rehabilitation," he said. "If you count one by one, the promises that he had made in 2017, many of them remain unfulfilled," Lininding said.

"We have not lost hope. But we were anticipating that they would put on a show when they made their promise."

More than 200,000 mostly Muslim residents of Marawi, known as Meranao, were forced to evacuate after a band of armed fighters, pledging allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant ([ISIL](#) or ISIS), took control of the city in May 2017 leading to a months-long siege.

The attack prompted Duterte to declare martial law across the entire island of Mindanao, and the military spent five months battling to regain control of the city from the armed fighters who belonged to the Abu Sayyaf Group and the so-called Maute Brothers.

Protests planned

Duterte is expected to discuss the security situation in the southern [Philippines](#) when he makes his annual address to congress on Monday afternoon at 4pm local time (08:00 GMT), amid expectations that he will push to extend martial law - already in place until the end of 2019 - for a fourth time.

At the protest on Monday, Lininding said he expects representatives from different sectors of the community - from artists and poets to civic leaders and women's activist groups - to show their solidarity with the refugees and internally displaced people.

They will gather at the main campus of Mindanao State University (MSU), the leading government centre of learning in the southern Philippines, which was spared the worst of the attack more than two years ago.

"We are not asking to oust President Duterte. We are just fighting for our right to abode," said Samira Gutoc-Tomawis, a former senatorial candidate in the 2019 elections and a resident of Marawi.

Protests are also expected in the capital, Manila, where supporters and opponents of Duterte, who faces a United Nations investigation into his brutal so-called "[war on drugs](#)" that has left thousands dead.

Duterte declared the city liberated in October 2017, but since then, none of the estimated 127,000 people from the most-affected area, known locally as "ground zero", have been able to return to their ruined homes. They are allowed back only for short visits supervised by the military.

Felix Castro, field manager of the government rehabilitation agency, Task Force Bangon Marawi, has a deadline of 2021 for the reconstruction, and told Al Jazeera in June that the return of some residents would start soon and would take place in phases. He did not give a timetable.

The government has said that more than 15,000 households have received \$1,400 in government cash assistance.

Reclaimed by nature

At the end of June, the buildings in "ground zero" remained in ruins.

While many structures were still standing, the walls seemed beyond repair. Domes of mosques also bore gaping holes - traces of countless explosions across the 250-hectare area. Since the 2017 attack, tall grass and vines have begun to reclaim the ruins of what was once a thriving city.

Lininding said in a separate statement that many residents have decided to look for temporary homes on their own, instead of staying in temporary housing, including plastic tents, provided by the government.

While Lininding and others have been vocal in their criticism of Duterte, many more have remained silent, despite their resentment towards the government.

"For many of us, they still live under fear, considering that martial law is still in place," he said.

"Those vulnerable among us also fear to say anything against the Duterte administration and the military for fear that they might not receive help from the government. That's our reality."

Sorhaila L Latip-Yusoph, a professor at MSU, noted that while the government has promised to bankroll public infrastructure in Marawi, Duterte himself made it clear that he will not help rebuild the thousands of private homes that were destroyed in the onslaught.

That has become a source of dissatisfaction for the local Meranao, after what they perceived as a dismissive statement from the president, who drummed up support in the 2016 campaign from the Muslim community by saying that he was part Meranao.

"I don't think that I should be spending for their buildings," Duterte was quoted as saying in April. "Anyway, they have a lot of money. Every Meranao, there is a businessman, and that includes the illegal drugs."

Discontent

Yusoph, who also hosts a radio programme in the Meranao language, said that the local community have been mostly cut off from the government rehabilitation effort.

"We have not really seen a concrete and transparent plan. I have not spoken to them," she told Al

Jazeera, adding that not one representative from the rehabilitation agency had appeared on her radio programme, which has a wide following among the Meranao-speaking community not only in Marawi, but in neighbouring communities.

“We have been trying to invite them to guest with us for two years now. But nothing. We should have been the best programme to be given that information,” Yusoph said.

For the Duterte administration to be successful in Marawi, they need to make the locals feel that they have a stake in the rehabilitation, she added.

Abdul Hamidullah Atar, the sultan of Marawi and a community leader, complained that instead of giving priority to civilian housing, Duterte had focussed on building a new military base; a decision that was likely only to prolong the city’s recovery and the suffering of local residents.

But he also recognised that it would be years before Marawi would become what it once was.

“Within the term of Duterte, the Marawi problem will not be solved,” he said. “We built Marawi for one hundred years, and they cannot do it in two years alone.”

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