

Mindanao (Philippines): Islamic State-aligned movements thrives in Covid-19 shadows

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Three years after militants laid waste to Marawi City ISIS operatives are using the virus crisis to recruit new fighters.

MINDANAO – Three years after Islamic State-aligned militants seized the southern Philippine city of Marawi, triggering a bloody five-month urban siege, violent extremism continues to flourish in the shadows of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As President Rodrigo Duterte struggles to rebuild and rehabilitate Marawi, the only Muslim majority city in the island nation, ISIS organizers are exploiting the misery and woe to recruit a new generation of militants that security officials fear are poised to strike again.

They are also leveraging the Covid-19 crisis and the government's military-enforced quarantine measures to rally disenfranchised and desperate youth to their terror-driven cause, analysts and authorities say.

On May 23, 2017, heavily armed men waiving black ISIS flags occupied the nation's only Muslim majority city in a bid to establish a wilayah, or a self-governed province, in Southeast Asia.

The foreign fighter-backed jihadist invasion placed the southern Philippines on the global terrorism map, killing 1,100 and displacing over 350,000 civilians, 127,865 of whom are still displaced according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The military campaign, punctuated by military aerial bombardments of militant positions in the city, left Marawi in ruins, with reconstruction and rehabilitation expected to cost a staggering 72.2 billion pesos (US\$1.39 billion). The city's "ground zero" still lies in rubble and is a no-go zone for residents.

Three years after the end of the Marawi siege, Philippine security forces are still struggling to stamp out violent Islamic extremism.

Rommel Banlaoi, chairman of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism, a think tank, claims that ISIS' activities have continued unabated amid the Covid-19 pandemic and a strict lockdown in the Philippines.

"Islamic militants are taking advantage of the quarantine measures against the pandemic as rallying issues to recruit members and to propagate the idea of violent extremism, especially in depressed rural areas heavily affected by lockdowns," the security analyst said.

Since February 2020, Philippine military forces stationed in Mindanao have been fighting on multiple fronts: Muslim armed groups aligned with ISIS, communist rebels, and the invisible

Covid-19 threat. Soldiers have been deployed to provide security to border checkpoints and to distribute assistance in rebel-influenced areas.

Last month, with the country under a Covid-19 hard lockdown, the military suffered a debilitating defeat after 11 soldiers were killed and 14 injured in an hour-long fierce encounter with the Abu Sayyaf Group in Patikul town in the island-province of Sulu, a known bailiwick of the ISIS-aligned group.

This month, the ISIS-affiliated Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), which operates in Maguindanao province, killed two soldiers and wounded another one helping to implement a Covid-19 community quarantine during a clash launched under cover of darkness in the town of Datu Hoffer.

Lieutenant General Cirilito Sobejana, commander of the Armed Forces of the Philippines' Western Mindanao Command, admitted that security forces already have their hands full with the pandemic and enforcing quarantine measures.

"We are presently battling against two different enemies," the general said, referring to the groups inspired by the Islamic State such as the Abu Sayyaf and the BIFF on one hand, and Covid-19 on the other.

The official stressed that military operations against the Islamic State-inspired groups will continue, based on Duterte's standing order to flush out the Abu Sayyaf Group, an extremist armed outfit founded in 1991 and classified by the US as a foreign terrorist organization.

Under Duterte, the country's first president from Mindanao who previously served as mayor of Davao City, the Abu Sayyaf Group has remained a security headache. So, too, has been the emergence of a new brand of extremism that uses suicide bombings to target both military and non-military establishments.

The tactic, referred to as "suicide terrorism" by analysts, was rarely used before ISIS made inroads into the Philippines.

Authorities point to four attacks in particular, including a July 31, 2018 attack on a military checkpoint in Lamitan, Basilan that killed 10 with the main suspect a German national of Moroccan origin, and January 27, 2019 twin blasts perpetrated by an Indonesian couple that killed at least 20 people and wounded over 100 others at a Catholic church in Jolo province, as lethal signposts of the trend.

These suicide bombings, Banlaoi says, indicate that ISIS foreign fighters continue to operate in Mindanao.

As of the end 2019, data gathered by his think tank from intelligence sources showed that at least 59 foreign fighters illegally entered the country and were being coddled by Islamic State-inspired groups in Mindanao.

He claims they see the Philippines as their "new land of jihad" after ISIS was largely routed in the Middle East, including in Iraq and Syria.

Most foreign fighters arriving in the Philippines hail from nearby Indonesia and Malaysia, while others came from the Arab World, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, according to Banlaoi.

He said they often come to facilitate the transfer of funds and weapons to local supporters, to

conduct violent extremist propaganda activities, and to transfer skills in jihad. While the Covid-19 lockdown has slowed the entry of foreign fighters, they continue to support their local counterparts, Banlaoi said.

“Sadly, local terrorist fighters are currently exploiting the Covid-19 situation to further justify their violent extremist activities,” he said. “They use quarantine measures against the pandemic as rallying issues to recruit members and to propagate the idea of violent extremism, especially in depressed rural areas heavily affected by lockdowns.”

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- “ISIS thrives in Covid-19 shadows in Philippines”. Asia Times. May 22, 2020:
<https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/isis-thrives-in-covid-19-shadows-in-philippines/>