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The background image shows a mosque with a large green dome and a tall minaret. A massive, dark plume of smoke or dust rises from behind the mosque, filling a significant portion of the sky. Debris is seen falling through the air. The scene suggests a recent explosion or conflict. The image is framed by decorative curved lines at the top and bottom.

INSECURITY IN MINDANAO

Conflict and state-sponsored violence

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Cover photo: Filipino government troops continue their assault
against Maute Group insurgents who had taken over parts of the city
of Marawi, June 2017.

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SUMMARY

This brief provides an overview of the challenges facing the various autonomous government authorities of Mindanao, in the southern Philippines, in transitioning the region from conflict to peacebuilding, and to assess the response of the Philippine state to these challenges. Mindanao has long been fractured by a toxic mixture of political violence, identity-based armed conflict, and ethnic and clan divisions, and has been beset by sustained rebel and terrorist violence. These divisive factors have militated against regional political unity and social coherence, exacerbated by the area's socio-economic and development challenges. This context

has also provided fertile ground for non-state armed groups involved in criminal enterprises to develop. When strongman Rodrigo Duterte was elected mayor of Davao, the capital of Mindanao, before he became president of the country, his approach to regional insecurity took the form of a highly securitized crackdown involving state-sanctioned and extrajudicial violence meted out by death squads. The methodology is qualitative and presents a narrative grounded in both primary and secondary data sets. These are supplemented by publicly available resources from news, research and civil-society organizations.

Key points

- State-sponsored violence has been deployed in Mindanao, and the Philippines more broadly, as a national policy.
- Extrajudicial killings have continued in the war on drugs across the Philippines, following the same pattern as the earlier violence under Duterte's Davao Death Squad.
- The government implemented martial law in the Mindanao region for two years – purportedly for security, but conveniently hindering investigations of human-rights abuses by the state.
- Mindanao has seen a disproportionately high number of killings of human-rights advocates and activists.
- Extremist and rebel groups in Mindanao are involved in criminal economies, deriving financing from drug and arms trafficking, kidnapping and extortion.
- There is evidence that political elites in the region are involved in illicit drug markets.
- A fundamental factor in promoting regional security and stability will be the need to support Mindanao in its transition to a peaceful, resilient post-conflict future.



INTRODUCTION: MINDANAO, CONFLICT AND DUTERTE

With a population of a little over 24 million, the Mindanao archipelago is one of three island groups in the Philippines, and Mindanao is second biggest island in the country. Although rich in natural resources and with a sizeable agricultural production potential, Mindanao accounts for 37 per cent of the nation's poor, and possesses four of the five poorest regions in the Philippines. The newly formed Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), located in the south-west quarter of the territory and extending into the Sulu and Celebes seas, has the highest incidence of poverty in the nation, with 59 per cent of its population living below the poverty line, compared to a national average of 24 per cent.¹

Mindanao is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community of Muslims, Christians, indigenous peoples and traditional clans, and has a lengthy history of ethnic and religious separatist movements, rebellions and clan disputes (known locally as *rido*). The BARMM, established in March 2019 and its precursor, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM, established in 1989), are the outcome of an attempt by the Philippines government to retain, in a self-governing capacity, the Muslim areas of the region that had been seeking independence.² Today the BARMM is composed of five Muslim-majority provinces: Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. Historically, the Christian-majority regions of Mindanao have consistently opposed the redrawing of boundaries on the island to accommodate an autonomous Muslim homeland. At the same time, there has been opposition within the autonomous region to the location of its boundaries and the process by which the boundaries were set, leading to the formation of several religion-based separatist movements.

A shallow grave of victims is dug at the scene of a massacre of a political clan, which included several journalists, on the outskirts of Ampatuan, Maguindanao, November 2009.

© REUTERS/Erik de Castro

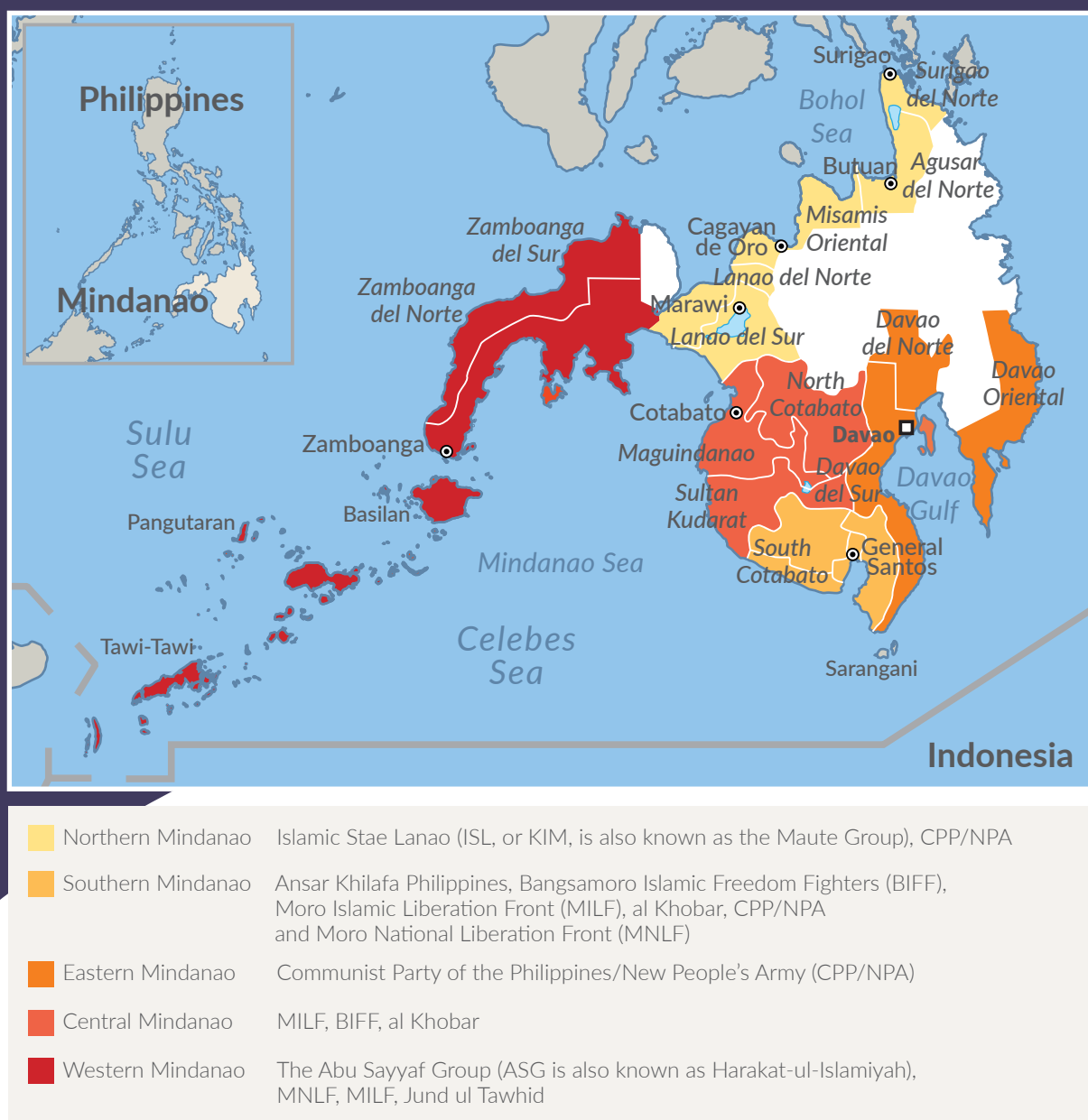


FIGURE 1: The geography of armed group presence in Mindanao by territory of influence or control

SOURCE: BenarNews and International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research.

In a related issue, the indigenous peoples of Mindanao consistently lack a representative voice in local political affairs that affect them given that, generally, they are not organized in a similar political or military manner.³ The cultural and political divisions present in Mindanao in general, and areas of disputed autonomy, such as the BARMM in particular, have prevented the region's inhabitants from unifying under a single national or regional leader.

As a consequence, Mindanao has been the site of some of the nation's most sustained violence. Conflict has taken the form of disputes between

various Mindanaoan armed groups and national government forces, inter-communal tensions, clan warfare, religious extremism, and criminal violence arising out of or aligned with these factions. This conflict has sustained decades of internal displacement, poverty, death and destruction. It has disrupted the delivery of health and education services, especially for the most marginalized households, and has led to a chain of human impacts that have stunted human security and development even in the territory's few conflict-free areas. This persistent insecurity is a primary reason for the deterioration in

community resilience among affected populations, and the destruction of a socio-political environment conducive to the development of a durable peace on the island.

Four main sources of insecurity and conflict can be identified in Mindanao:

- Divides between Muslims, Christians and indigenous people, which led to a Muslim separatist outbreak in the 1970s, and which continue to be a major source of conflict today.
- Communist or socialist rebellions, mainly supported by urban workers and rural peasants.
- Clan feuds (i.e. *rido*), which influence ongoing clan-based competitive efforts at achieving self-governance and control over disputed territories and, in many cases, affect the perception of impartiality of occupied political offices.
- Islamic extremism, especially since the early 2000s, the latest form of conflict to emerge in the region.

The predominant Muslim-based separatist movement was the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which emerged in the 1970s seeking independence for the Moro (Muslim) people and which achieved the establishment of ARMM in 1989. However, conflict continued as autonomy led to few improvements in living conditions. In an attempt to end hostilities, a peace agreement was reached in 1996 between the MNLF and the national government. The parties to this agreement, however, have struggled to implement its terms, and as a result it has had little impact in resolving the fundamental causes of domestic conflict.⁴

Continued lack of success in achieving the MNLF goals saw the emergence of a new armed group. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was founded by members of the MNLF who broke ranks and pursued a more conservative vision of autonomy and security. After continuous fighting and several attempts to settle disputes – especially in 2008, after a peace agreement that was ruled unconstitutional by the country's Supreme Court – a final peace agreement between the national government and the MILF was signed in 2014. Known as the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro, it proposed the creation of the BARMM as a new sub-state entity with a new governmental structure that would be responsible for taxation, justice and law enforcement. The BARMM would elect its own representatives and leaders, although they would remain accountable to the Philippine state.

Even so, Mindanao has continued to experience widespread poverty and violence, providing fertile ground for the emergence of additional armed groups with increasingly conservative ideologies and visions. These include the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, a breakaway faction of the MILF; the Maute Group, a small group of fighters aligned with the religious politics of the Islamic State (IS); and Abu Sayyaf, another IS-aligned group that is also involved in significant criminal enterprises. On the eastern side of the island, and in parallel to the ongoing insurgent conflict in the south-west, the New People's Army (NPA) emerged in 1969 as the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. The NPA's ideological roots are as a leftist insurgency, mobilized by workers in the urban areas and peasants in the rural ones. Its main goal continues to be to overthrow the Philippines government, expel the US influence from the country, and redistribute land to the landless poor.

In the tradition of Filipino politics, only a strongman could drag such belligerent actors together and force a resolution.

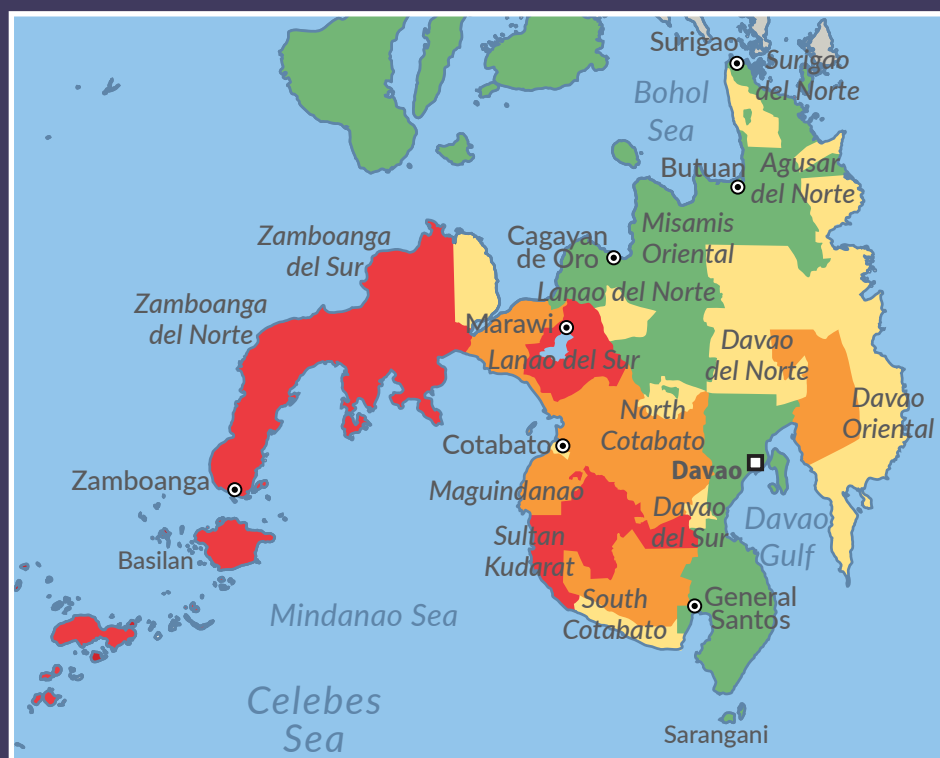


FIGURE 2: Classification of personal security risk by district, Mindanao, September 2018

SOURCE: Classified security threat map provided to authors by a diplomatic partner

Another source of conflict, particularly in the BARMM, is *rido*. Competition for governance and control of territory is one of the most prominent reasons for *rido*, which often leads to significant instances of vendetta violence. In the so-called Maguindanao massacre of 2009, one of the most well-known such instances, more than 50 members of the Mangudadatu clan were killed by members of the Ampatuan clan, with the later allegedly supported by elected officials of the autonomous government.

Governing on the island, with its rampant religious, ethnic, clan, extremist and criminal violence, has always been a challenge. It is one of the primary reasons that the regions of Mindanao, even those with peace instruments and parties dedicated to the achievement of those instruments, have remained significantly underdeveloped (compared to their administrative peers elsewhere in the nation), consistently insecure and politically unstable. In the tradition of Filipino politics, only a strongman could drag such belligerent actors together and force a resolution. Often, such resolutions were achieved not through the niceties of diplomacy, but rather through the imposition of securitized solutions that saw disproportionate levels of state-sponsored intervention and violence.

Such was the approach that Rodrigo Duterte pursued as he and his clan took the reins of power when he was elected mayor of Davao City.



DUTERTE'S WAR ON DRUGS

Davao City, Mindanao's capital, is where Duterte ruled on and off for four decades as mayor before his 2016 presidential win. Davao was the testing ground for his now infamous 'war on drugs' campaign. Human-rights groups estimate that while Duterte was mayor of Davao, he accrued a death toll of almost 1 400, mostly killed by informal (but state-encouraged)⁵ death squads. Duterte boasted on several occasions, and not in jest, that even as mayor he had partaken in the extrajudicial killings in his city. The victims of these killings ranged from alleged petty criminals to street children; a variety of vulnerable people, many of whom were not drug users or dealers,⁶ but easy victims of a political official's campaign to 'clean the streets' using disproportionate and extrajudicial violence to achieve and enforce safety and security.

Year after year, Duterte maintained his grip on power based on the claim that Davao was one of the safest cities in the world, despite the fact that news magazine *AsiaWeek* once called it 'murder city'.⁷ In Duterte's last years as mayor, Davao had the highest murder rate in the Philippines; most of which remain unsolved. Despite his violence, Duterte enjoyed a high level of support from the people of Davao, many of whom felt that there was vindication for his approach to crime, that only through such violence and fear could peace be maintained for the majority. That it came at significant personal cost for the minority – including those who were too poor, disenfranchised, marginalized, or scared to raise a voice – mattered little.

In fact, the drug war's extrajudicial killings have continued across the Philippines, following the same basic political design and strategic pattern as the earlier deaths in Davao. For example, a common technique used by the so-called Davao Death Squad (DDS)⁸ and replicated today, was the use of motorcycles during shootings and stab-bings, which enabled the assassins to move quickly and with greater surprise, even in broad daylight, regardless of whether witnesses were present. Such incidents were

Members of the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency talk to residents during anti-drug operations in Quezon City, March 2017.

© REUTERS/Romeo Ranoco



Police escort Leila de Lima, a senator detained on drug charges, on her way to a local court to face an obstruction of justice complaint, March 2017.

© REUTERS/Romeo Ranocot

often referred to officially as '*nanlaban*', literally meaning resisting or fighting back – hence 'killed while resisting arrest': an often implausible explanation that has become common, including for killings of people in police custody.

Attempts were made to investigate Duterte, his drug-war tactics, and in particular the DDS, while he was mayor. In March 2009, then Commissioner on Human Rights Leila de Lima investigated Davao

government officials in relation to allegations of the involvement of death squads in drug-war killings. She claimed at the time that former DDS members were willing to testify. In the end, no senior officials were prosecuted and the investigation led only to a one-month suspension of 21 Davao police officers for neglecting to curb or resolve the killings. The greatest sanction was reserved for De Lima herself. By then a member of the Philippines Senate, she was imprisoned by Duterte in February 2017 – not long after he took office as president. Shortly after, she was recognized internationally for her campaign against Duterte’s drug war killings. In an ironic turn, this human-rights campaigner against the state-sanctioned violence of the president’s war on drugs was herself later charged with drug trafficking. She remains incarcerated at the time of writing, without having undergone a trial to decide on the allegations against her.

The DDS was allegedly made up of former rebel soldiers, local paramilitaries and private security officers, known criminals and, most concerning, members of local law enforcement.⁹ Former death squad members admitted to the killings in testimony before senatorial inquiries in 2017 led by Senator de Lima. One Edgar Matobato claimed¹⁰ that he was part of the DDS from 1988 to 2013 and that he had been involved in 300 murders, including that of Jun Pala, a Davao-based journalist killed in 2003. Matobato said that he had witnessed Duterte himself kill people¹¹ on eight occasions during his time as a DDS assassin.

Arturo Lascañas, a retired police officer from Davao City, first called Matobato a liar but later reversed his statement and corroborated Matobato’s story.¹² Lascañas admitted police involvement in the DDS before a Senate inquiry. He told lawmakers that police officers made up the core group of the DDS and that they were motivated by loyalty to Duterte and by large bounties paid for the killings they carried out. Lascañas spoke in detail about their operations, including the shutting down of closed-circuit cameras before a killing, the planting of drugs or a gun on victims, and even the practice of wrapping victims’ bodies with tape and dumping them in public areas.

A campaign designed as much to create terror as to promote the mayor’s political agenda and his rhetoric around a ‘safe city’, Duterte’s war on drugs cut its teeth in Davao in an attempt to prove that peace and security could be achieved if one were politically strong enough and brutal enough to overcome threats to the mission.





MAKING STATE VIOLENCE A NATIONAL POLICY

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte appears next to outgoing National Police Chief Ronald Bato Dela Rosa during the handover ceremony in Quezon City, April, 2018.

© REUTERS/Dondi Tawatao


When Duterte became president of the Philippines in 2016, his approach to what he saw to be the country's greatest threat was clear: kill everyone involved in drugs. Hours after taking the presidential oath, he encouraged citizens to kill drug users and dealers. Duterte urged police to kill without mercy, even suggesting that they plant evidence if there was none, and promised to absolve them of any legal culpability.¹³ It was a significant policy shift from previous administrations, but it was consistent with the promises he had made throughout his candidacy for the presidency. As a result of his declaration that all those involved in the local drug trade would be killed, people went in droves to 'surrender' or register with the *barangays*¹⁴ and the police in fear for their lives. Police and community leaders also urged people who had a history of drug use or dealing to register or face the consequences. Citizens were encouraged to report the names of anyone they knew who could be classified as a drug user.

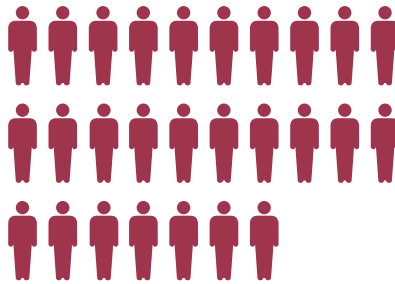
This campaign resulted in the creation of so-called drug watch lists, and people, particularly those with no history of drug use or dealing, scrambled to get their names removed. Many were included on the lists for reasons other than drug use, including the settling of personal scores. Honed in Davao, the blades of Duterte's new national war on drugs were shown to be swift, sharp and effective.

Today, many of the people named on those lists are dead. Collateral damage was high. The war on drugs was supposed to end after six months, but at the time of writing has already lasted three years, and lasted for three years, and the death toll is high. The police claimed that 5 500 people were killed during their anti-drug operations since the beginning of the drug war in July 2016 to June 2019, while the



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 = 1 000 deaths



The Commission on Human Rights estimated that the number of dead could reach up to 27 000

Commission on Human Rights estimated that the number of dead could reach up to 27 000.¹⁵ The lack of an enforced requirement of due process – a procedural void exploited by lower-ranked police officers – resulted in cases of mistaken identity and the death of children; Duterte brushed these off, saying that ‘in war, there is collateral damage’. *Nanlaban* became the driving political narrative of the drug war; the extrajudicial killing of those accused of being drug users and small-scale dealers became its main tactic.

In a country already suffering from years of impunity and a slow, uneven justice system, families and witnesses continue to be afraid to seek justice. Few cases have been filed in local courts against the police. Since 2017, only three police officers have been convicted of murder in relation to their involvement in the drug war. In June 2019, human-rights experts from the United Nations called for an international investigation into the attacks, some fatal, on human-rights advocates. Duterte called the demand an ‘unpardonable intrusion’ into the country’s sovereignty.¹⁶ Duterte’s relationship with his critics could be summed up by his threats. He claims that his critics merely wish to oust or impeach him, and has said that he will suspend the writ of habeas corpus (whereby a person can report an unlawful detention or imprisonment to a court to help secure release) or ‘put them in jail’. The current administration’s defensive strategies have led to the impeachment of Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, the imprisonment of Senator Leila de Lima (as mentioned), and repeated arrests of journalist Maria Ressa of Rappler.

In Mindanao, or elsewhere in the Philippines, it has not just been a war on drug users that has drawn international attention to the Duterte administration and its tactics. In 2017, Duterte faced his worst security crisis when an IS-linked militant group managed to hold off the military forces for several months in Marawi.

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THE MARAWI CRISIS AND MARTIAL LAW

In April 2018, residents are allowed to return home for the first time since the battle between government troops and IS militants began in May 2017, in Marawi.

© REUTERS/Erik De Castro

Nestled between Lake Lanao and the Agus River in Mindanao, the port city of Marawi used to be a thriving trade hub. The capital of Lanao del Sur Province, Marawi is part of the BARMM and home to a Muslim majority population. The city was declared the Islamic City of Marawi in 1980. On 23 May 2017, members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines were looking for firearms in Basak Malutlut, a *barangay* in Marawi City.¹⁷ They had received unconfirmed reports of a terror plan to attack Marawi and of a sighting of Isnilon Hapilon, senior leader of the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf and one of the world's most wanted terrorists, with known links to al-Qaeda and IS. Hapilon had declared allegiance to IS in 2014, and was named emir of the Philippines and leader of its caliphate.

When the military confirmed the presence of Hapilon in Marawi, they moved in May 2016 to arrest him, triggering a clash between military forces and armed men identified as members of the Maute Group, a terrorist organization responsible for a number of bombings in Mindanao. This began a five-month siege (May to October 2017) that left Marawi, the only Islamic city in the predominantly Catholic Philippines, in ruins. It was the most sustained active combat the country had seen since World War II. Many believe that the siege in Marawi had been well planned and the botched attempt to capture Hapilon had set it in motion prematurely.

Earlier incidents may have prepared the way for the siege of Marawi. In February 2016, combined forces of the Maute Group and Abu Sayyaf attacked the town of

Butig, 50 kilometres from Marawi. The first attack failed, but attackers managed to lay siege to the town in November, displacing about 17 000 civilians. The siege only lasted for five days, after which the military forced the terrorists out; they fled to the mountains, but surfaced again in Marawi in May 2017.

The Maute took over strategic parts of the city while waving the black flag of IS. Banks were robbed and they set fire to institutions, including St Mary Cathedral, Dansalan College and the city jail, after freeing prisoners, most of whom were Maute fighters. About 200 000 civilians fled their homes, thinking that the siege would be over soon. Others were unable to escape and remained trapped between clashes. The government declared deadlines to end the siege deadlines to end the siege (which were never met), and pushed for heavy attacks by the military. Bombs rained on Marawi indiscriminately, reducing it to rubble and leaving civilian and military casualties. The city was declared liberated on 17 October 2017. Duterte blamed the siege on a drug raid gone wrong and dismissed the idea of terrorism. He said that Marawi was a hotbed of drug trafficking and claimed that the Maute Group was financed by drug lords.

Duterte was in Moscow for a state visit when the Marawi siege was unfolding on 23 May 2017. Around 10 pm, Manila time, he declared martial law through the issuance of Proclamation No. 216, which also suspended the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus for the whole island of Mindanao. 'Checkpoints will be allowed. Searches will be allowed. Arrest without a warrant will be allowed in Mindanao.'¹⁸ Under the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the president may declare martial law to 'prevent and suppress lawless violence, invasion or rebellion'. In case of invasion or rebellion, the president may declare martial law and suspend habeas corpus for 60 days. He then must present a strong factual basis for doing so to the Supreme Court. Even after the liberation of Marawi, martial law was extended three times.

Martial law complicated efforts to provide humanitarian relief for Marawi residents. Most people who fled Marawi escaped with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Many had not been able to bring identification cards and other legal documents, and these people were questioned by security force personnel for hours. Obtaining identification documents during a crisis under martial law is nearly impossible. Humanitarian workers responding to the crisis experienced difficulty in transporting aid as well. Vehicle registrations had to be renewed every few days, and shipments of relief goods were inspected for hours. This worsened after relief goods in Manila to be sent to Marawi were found to contain bullets and gun parts. In the first few months, several evacuees, including children, died of diarrhoea and dehydration. Davao business leaders expressed concerns over the prolonged implementation of martial law, saying that it created an atmosphere of economic insecurity. In December 2019, Duterte decided to end two years of martial law in Mindanao.

The attacks on human-rights defenders and activists are greater in number in Mindanao than in the rest of the country. The human rights group Karapatan reported that out of 266 activists, human rights advocates, peasants and tribe members killed during the war on drugs, 135 were from Mindanao.¹⁹



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Since July 2016, 108 out of 209 political prisoners arrested and 8 out of 10 victims of forced disappearances were also from the region. Martial law was used to hinder investigations of human-rights abuses. Journalists, advocates and activists have been arrested, detained and questioned for hours. In February 2018, three foreign missionaries of the United Methodist Church investigating the massacre of eight leaders of the T'boli-Dulangan Manobo tribe were stopped at a checkpoint in Koronadal City.

Tawanda Chandiwana of Zimbabwe, Miracle Osman of Malawi and Adam Shaw of the United States were detained, and their passports and identification cards confiscated. The military allegedly said that under martial law, they shouldn't have gone to critical areas. The Bureau of Immigration later claimed that Chandiwana was on a so-called 'watch list' for engaging in political activities.

Sister Patricia Fox, a 71-year-old Australian nun who had been living in the Philippines for 27 years, was arrested in April 2018 at a convent in Manila. Authorities showed a picture of her inside a jail in Tagum City, Mindanao,²⁰ visiting political prisoners. Prior to her arrest, she had participated in investigations of human-rights abuses in Mindanao. She was later released, but immigration officials refused to extend her visa. After months of appeal, Sister Patricia Fox was forced to leave the country.

Lawyers are also targets. The Integrated Bar of the Philippines has recorded 38 lawyers, prosecutors, and judges killed from 2016 to the time of writing. There is a climate of fear in which killings are rampant and institutions are being targeted.

Early in 2019, the National Union of Journalists in the Philippines was accused in tabloids of links with the communist insurgents. The government also attacked media companies such as the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, VeraFiles and Rappler. The president made claims that these institutions were part of an 'ouster plot' and incorrectly accused Rappler of receiving CIA funding. On 9 June 2019, Davao-based journalist Margarita Valle was arrested by police and soldiers in Misamis Oriental and accused of multiple murders, arson and destruction of property. Police claimed that Valle had links with the NPA. She was later released and police stated that the arrest was a case of mistaken identity. Valle has filed charges against the military and the police for arbitrary detention, torture, violation of rights of arrested persons and gross misconduct. Since Duterte came into office in July 2016 to the time of writing, 13 journalists have been murdered, according to the National Union of Journalists in the Philippines. Seven of those journalists were from Mindanao. In the same period, 13 mayors have been assassinated.



Australian missionary Patricia Fox is escorted by colleagues before filing a petition calling for the review of her deportation case at the Department of Justice. The immigration bureau voided her visa after the president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, had complained about her participation in protest rallies.

© REUTERS/Romeo Ranoco



CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CONFLICT AND CRIME CONTINUE

A banner opposing drug-related killings is pictured along a street in Quezon City, November 2017.

© REUTERS/Erik De Castro

Conflict and crime remain endemic in Mindanao, although the number of violent clashes between the MILF and the national army has decreased since the 2014 peace agreement. The MNLF rejects that agreement, since it sees it as an obstacle to fully implementing its own 1996 agreement. Meanwhile, some MILF factions have rejected the peace agreement and the group's decision to reduce its demand from independence to autonomy. The most significant such faction is the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, which began separating from the MILF in 2008 and was formally founded in 2010.

At the same time, Islamic extremist groups, most of which have pledged allegiance to IS, continue to carry out terrorist attacks in the region. One of the most recent cases was the 2017 siege of Marawi described above. Other rebel groups, mainly represented by the National Democratic Front, also continue to carry out attacks. Clan-motivated disputes also continue to occur. All of the groups mentioned above are also involved in the dominant criminal economies in Mindanao, and derive significant financing from different types of crime, the most common being drug and arms trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion.

President Duterte's imposition of martial law in May 2017 in Mindanao has widely affected indigenous people and peasants. Karapatan, an NGO for the defence of human rights, reported in 2019 that there had been 49 victims of extrajudicial killings, 116 victims of attempted extrajudicial killing, 404 654 forcibly displaced people and 336 124 victims of indiscriminate gunfire and aerial bombings in Mindanao since the imposition of martial law.²¹

Kidnapping

In an extract from his examination of the crime-terror nexus on Mindanao, Rob Atwell outlines the role that kidnapping has played in the financing of indigenous terror-oriented groups. As he notes:

Kidnappings for ransom are a significant source of income for militant and criminal groups in the southern Philippines, most notably Abu Sayyaf. This group is responsible for a recent surge in maritime kidnappings in the Sulu and Celebes Seas, encompassing the waters around the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. They reportedly raised \$7 million from kidnappings for ransom in 2016 and currently hold 29 people hostage, including 21 foreigners. The group frequently works with Sabah- and Sulu-based criminal gangs, which sell kidnapping victims to the militant group.²²

Extortion

On the role of extortion, a similar capital accumulation measure to that of kidnapping, Atwell explains:

Extortion is also a common funding strategy for hybrid militant-criminal groups, particularly the Maoist NPA. This group targets foreign and local businesses operating in Mindanao, as well as in several areas outside the region, such as Samar and Isabella Provinces. Most of the targeted companies are in the mining or agricultural sectors. Recently, Mindanao's banana industry has been under strain from NPA extortion. The group justifies its extortion activities as 'revolutionary taxes'.²³

By 'revolutionary tax', the NPA, for example, feels it has the 'right' to impose a levy on all persons and businesses in its 'territory'.²⁴

Arms trafficking

The Philippines in general has a worrying arms-trafficking problem. This is due in part to the incorrect implementation of amnesty processes and lax regulations related to weapons possession. In

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Mindanao, with the high presence of separatist and rebel groups, the flow of weapons is a predominant factor driving armed conflict. The perpetrators of the 2009 Maguindanao massacre, described earlier, which claimed the lives of at least 58 people and was fuelled by clan rivalry with the support of local politicians, were armed with around 2 000 weapons, including heavy weapons, and included members of paramilitary groups that were supposedly under governmental control. Furthermore, 10 per cent of the weapons used were registered in the government's official inventory. This atrocity demonstrated the capacity of armed actors to engage in conflict and evade state control, and exposed the central government's weak control over weapons in the region.

Drug trafficking

Local market prices and consumption figures support an assumption that drug trafficking is probably the most profitable illicit revenue stream for armed groups that are evolving into what could be called hybrid militant-criminal groups in Mindanao.²⁵ Drug

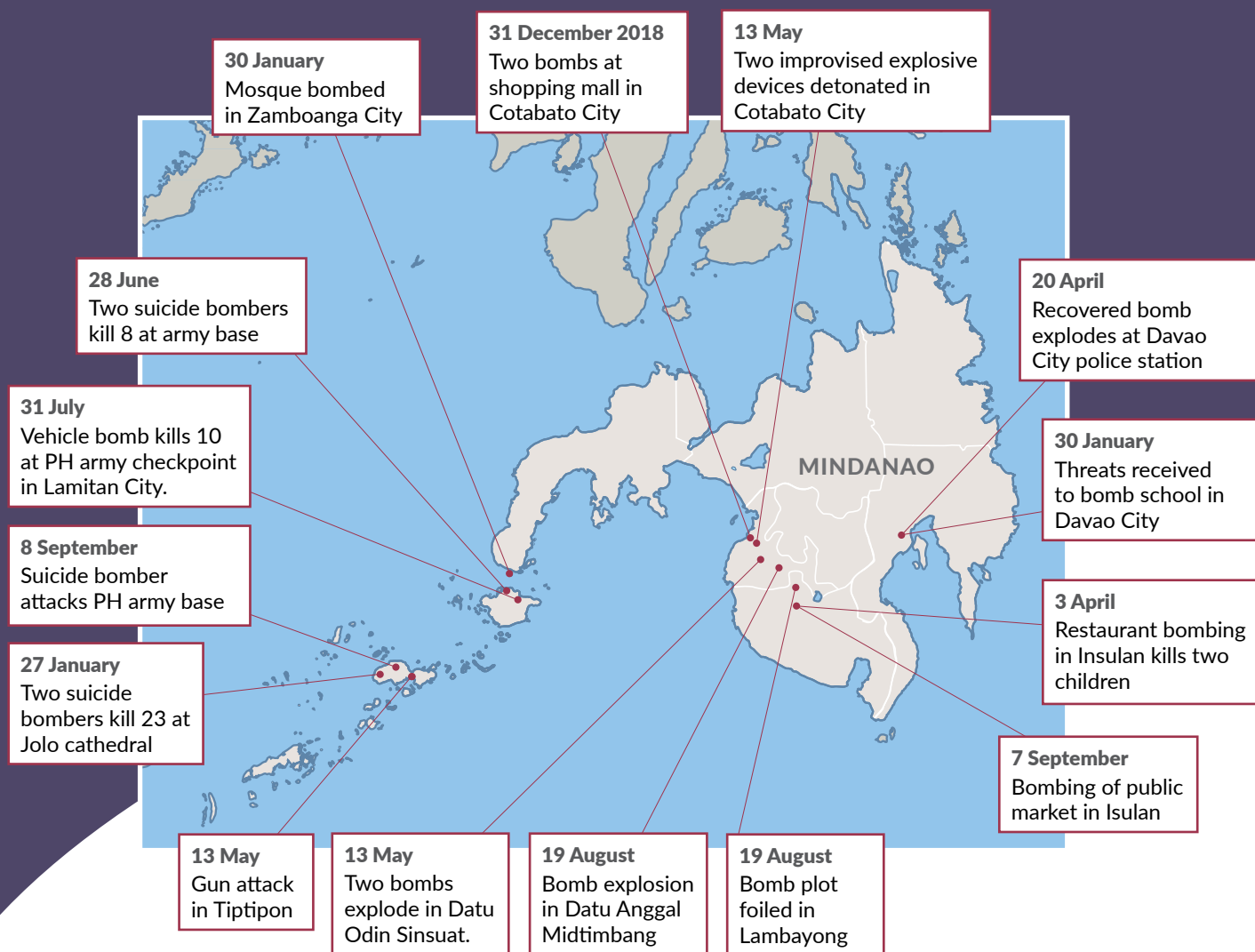


FIGURE 4: Alleged terror-related attacks in Mindanao, January to September 2019

SOURCE: Incidents gathered from news reports, government social media posts, and personal correspondence

use in Mindanao has been reported as a recurrent issue. While it has been suggested that Mindanao is not a primary centre for methamphetamine production, local consumption estimates suggest that there is a widespread drug economy in the region. The Philippines has one of the more expensive methamphetamine markets in South East Asia, and Mindanao is becoming a more active production centre, controlled for the most part by armed groups. The drug economy in Mindanao has become an increasingly integrated part of wider drug-trafficking networks in the Sulu and Celebes seas.

Although it is difficult to track the participation of rebel and insurgent groups in the control of drug trafficking or production, investigations have discovered significant links between corrupt political elites and the drug economy. An example of this is a drug cartel in Lanao del Sur that has allegedly been supported by city and municipal

politicians, and which controls the drug market through political offices in the province.²⁶ A conclusion to extract from this is that the constant conflict, the widespread lack of administrative control, and the influential role of clan leaders and politicians in the maintenance of security have given local politicians and political leaders more opportunity to get involved in local and regional drug markets.

In 2016, the Philippines government and the MILF signed the Agreement of Cooperation and Coordination in the Campaign against Illegal Drugs, in which the MILF pledged to support operations against drug-trafficking networks and to provide information on individuals known to be involved in drug trafficking in the areas controlled by the group. A result of this was the capture of men from the Commander Madrox armed group who led a drug-trafficking network in Cotabato Province.

In 2018, the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) in Davao claimed that by conducting 1 058 anti-drug operations they had pushed the street price of drugs significantly higher. Despite this achievement, 48 per cent of respondents to a recent survey in Mindanao said they still feel unsafe inside their homes and in the streets.²⁷ This is not a surprise given that Duterte has always admitted that there are politicians, judges, generals and high-level police officers involved in the drug trade.²⁸ Such lists have had more than 150 names, though in one case it was later shown that a particular judge on the list had been dead for eight years, while several others had incomplete names. Still, some of the politicians on the list eventually were killed, including Rolando Espinosa, who was killed *nanlaban*-style while he was detained in a jail cell inside a police station.

In 2017, a government employee claiming to be an assassin working with police officers and the local government of Zamboanga del Norte gave a statement to Congress that he had been tasked by the governor to kill drug trade rivals and political enemies. Rolly Daligdig made this claim after two colleagues, Crisanto Gulang and Jeanette Acevedo, were killed while under arrest in PDEA custody after they had promised a full account of drug activities in Zamboanga del Norte. The governor of Zamboanga del Norte, Roberto Uy, is on President Duterte's list of public officials who, he alleges, are involved in the drug trade. A police colonel was killed in this city in 2018 during a buy-bust operation by fellow police officers.

Investigations have discovered significant links between corrupt political elites and the drug economy.



IMPLICATIONS FOR DURABLE PEACE IN A POST-CONFLICT MINDANAO

Laboratory equipment used in the production of methamphetamine hydrochloride or *shabu* is seen during a PDEA operation in Valenzuela, May 2016.

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Duterte's war on drugs has been waging for three years. It has had little effect on the supply chain of drugs in the Philippines. Instead, government corruption and neglect have resulted in the loss of hundreds of kilos of crystal meth confiscated from a port in Manila. The PDEA fears that these drugs are now circulating in Mindanao. In March 2019, 166 kilos of *shabu* (the local name for crystal meth) were found in Alabang, south of Manila. The PDEA said that it came from Mindanao, claiming that the Sulu Sea is being used as an entry point for illegal drugs.

The PDEA and the Philippines National Police quantify the success of the drug war in numbers: the value of *shabu* seized, number of people arrested, or number of *barangays* declared free from drugs. They try to downplay the fact that there have been some 22 000 alleged unsolved murders since July 2016. Multiple requests from journalists for data on the killings continue to be denied. The lack of transparency within the government remains a hindrance in further documenting the real situation on the ground. Drug-war-related killings in the Mindanao region continue to be underreported, and journalists depend on their sources in the police to pass along information. In some cases, they find out about deaths from the police or others after a few days have already passed, and by that time, the timeliness of this news has passed. Media outlets in Mindanao do not have the resources to station reporters in remote areas.

Peace, stability and security across Mindanao are essential to the broader human security of the Philippines and the surrounding region. As such, supporting Mindanao in its transition to a resilient post-conflict future – while respecting its various political autonomies – is a key factor in the promotion of a more secure and stable region. There remains much to be done to ensure the transition to a territory that enjoys peace, stability, and human security rather than one dominated by the historic characteristics of terror, chronic criminality and insecurity. The lingering, evolving threat of extremism; the stubborn persistence and interconnectedness of illicit markets, flows and actors; and the backdrop of chronic legitimacy crises and unresolved human insecurity – particularly in the context of state-sponsored violence – continue to present fundamental challenges to the realization of a resilient, autonomous and peaceful Mindanao.

The recent ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law and the emergence of the BARMM as a peacetime political entity provide some grounds for optimism. However, heavily armed groups with strong financial ties to terrorism, illicit drug manufacturing and arms trafficking still operate with impunity in Mindanao. Much of the violence and insecurity that were a daily presence in the decades prior to the current period of peacebuilding and political reconciliation continue to thrive. This decreasing but sustained insecurity and structured violence²⁹ is the result of a toxic mixture of political violence, identity-based armed conflict, criminal violence and terror that characterizes Mindanao's myriad established and emergent armed groups, and their competitive political and illicit economic interests in an increasingly interconnected maritime region.

As a recent analysis notes, Mindanao 'remains locked in a world where alliances between criminal and extremist groups have not been destroyed, where new internal and cross-border alliances between extremist groups are increasing, and where transition-induced violence continues to grow'.³⁰ The transition to peace, therefore, is bound to be a short-lived political exercise fraught with conflict and violence unless the impacts of these criminal and extremist actors can be isolated and mitigated, and the human insecurity that enables them to thrive can be reduced and, eventually, alleviated.

Peace, stability and security across Mindanao are essential to the broader human security of the Philippines and the surrounding region.

NOTES

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- 5 State-encouraged in the sense that Duterte himself has boasted of directing police personnel to kill drug users and traders. 'Whistle-blower' testimony before a subsequent senatorial investigation implicated police and other security personnel in the extra-judicial killings undertaken by the so-called DDS. There are rumours as well, some stoked by comments from Duterte, that as Mayor he participated in at least one of these DDS missions.
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