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Philippines

The Marawi Siege and the Declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao (Part 2)

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV509 - June 2017 -

Publication date: Wednesday 28 June 2017

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The longest and the most serious take over in a Southeast Asian country by ISIS inspired Jihadists has entered its fifth week. It has already displaced more than 70,000 families or around 350,000 individuals of the City of Marawi, the bastion of the Islamic faith in the predominantly Roman Catholic Philippines. According to the Philippine government's Joint Task Force Marawi the latest death toll has reached 475 of which 380 from the Islamists, 69 from the AFP/PNP and 26 from the civilians. A total of 1,629 civilians were rescued or had dared to escape from the burning City. The AFP and PNP have reported to recover a total 208 high powered rifles (HPRs).

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has already thrown all its available resources, military hardwares and air assets into the battle with the extremists for the control of Marawi. This includes putting into action once again the SF 260 fighter/bomber which were suspended earlier because they had unleashed a "friendly" bomb killing and wounding their own soldiers (10 dead and 7 wounded). Almost everyday aerial bombings and artillery shelling have rained the City sparing no one and hitting everything resulting to the continuous burning of buildings. AFP's reinforcements coming from the different parts of the country are seen almost everyday.

But to date, the Jihadists have repelled this sustained push by the AFP to retake the City using all available resources and tactics at their disposal like the skilled snipers, rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) to knock out and immobilize the armoured vehicles of the AFP. The extremists have also used skillfully their numerous high velocity assault weapons in the close quarter combat urban warfare.

On the other hand, the AFP have learned fast to counter the deadly and destructive effects of the RPGs by rigging wooden panels or soft materials like putting up back packs around the armoured plate of their vehicles to soften the impact of the RPGs.

It should be noted that both (AFP and the Jihadists) are not really experienced in urban warfare. The government security sector has been oriented and trained mainly in conventional warfare in which the setting is almost always in the rural areas while the extremists have similar weakness but they use to their advantage their familiarity of the city including the location of buildings and the streets to outmaneuver the AFP in this very brutal urban warfare. The close quarter combat has been done in every area, street, building and every room to wrest and assert control over these quarters from each other.

Meanwhile, the civilians who are still trapped in the city are facing serious problems. With almost non-stop fighting and intense bombings they have limited options. Either they die inside the house while hiding for a month because of hunger or they die getting out from the snipers of both AFP and the extremists to quench their thirst for freedom.

Based on the accounts of the survivors, they had to hide in the house cellars during the day so the Jihadists would not find them but their problem was how to survive the intense artillery shelling and the massive aerial bombings which usually start very early in the morning.

The survivors would sometimes dress in black like the Maute/Abu Sayyaf in order to find any available food left behind by the residents.

Accordingly, they are happy if the places they were hiding happened to be near the grocery stores because they

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could avoid hunger while supplies last. Their problem would be their supply of water. It would be their lucky day if it rained, otherwise they would have to navigate their way around the debris and decomposing human cadavers to get the much needed water.

But what made them survive from these seemingly unsurmountable ordeals was their very creative way of communicating to their loved ones. Many of these survivors had used the solar powered panel to charge their cellphone batteries and maintained their sanity and helped them to understand their self worth and their reason to continue living by communicating with their loved ones. These human connections and commitments had to be renewed everyday. Their reason for living helped them a lot to bear almost anyhow in these most difficult and trying situations that they had found themselves in.

Such conditions can help people in the outside or those safe from Marawi's rampage to know the reasons of a group of Christian workers who had decided to escape and leave behind their co-worker with his seven month pregnant wife so they could give to the two their little remaining food to last them for a few more days. This would be their first child so their co-workers who made the successful escape believed that the thought of having their first born would be reason enough to make them cherish this new hope and survive in whatever it would take and lead them in spite of the fact that they were just hiding below the Maute's sniper's nest.

Situations and cases like these have made doctors and psychotherapists appreciate the resilience of such people who spent weeks surviving in a conflict zone and witnessing horrific violence around them.

Last June 16, 2017, eleven nameless victims (7 men, 3 women and 1 girl) who died in the first few days of the Marawi's siege were buried in a cemetery in Iligan City. They were among the 20 other victims who were brought to a funeral home in Iligan City. Only 9 bodies were identified and were claimed by their relatives. The other 11 victims had remained unidentified and no relatives had come to claim them. They might be Christian or Muslims but nobody knew. It has surely manifested a fact that they are more civilians who were killed in the Marawi attacks and counter attacks than the almost unchanged figure of civilian casualties presented by the security sector and re-echoed by the mainstream media.

But who cares about these unknown and nameless entity of Christian workers who have gone to Marawi to work for their living. Not a few young men and women from the different municipalities of Lanao del Norte had come to the city of Marawi to find employment in the business establishments as well as in the residences of the Marawi elites. Hundreds of them have not been accounted for and those few who have been "rescued" or have done a daring escape on their own would say that it was the extremists who had been in control over those places they had been hiding. They could see them patrolling openly on the streets near the places that the survivors were hiding.

There is indeed a big gap in presenting objective and accurate figures of the situation on the ground with the media (broadcast, print and television) almost repeating the figures and the messages which the security sector or their spokespersons want them to communicate to the world. They are not just embedded in the army or the government's command center but they also become virtual spokespersons of the latter. In most cases, when the media talk to the civilians who had escaped or rescued it was always after the so-called debriefings of the security sector or the intelligence operators where strict instructions given to the victims or survivors to limit the information to the media.

This could be the reason/s behind the "no question asked" by the media when the deadlines set or fixed by the AFP to finish the extremists and their rampage of the city had lapsed three times. The media do not simply have other means and ways to counter check and validate the information given by the security sector.

It is important to note, that the armed built up and the muscle flexing of the Maute Jihadists have started since last

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year specifically in the Butig siege and the Piagapo armed encounters between the AFP and the extremists. In fact, earlier on (in August 2016) there was big arrest of 8 Maute militants who were bringing a large quantity of explosives near the municipality of Butig but no follow up was done. Interesting personalities were involved here including a brother of the Mayor in a neighboring municipality of the province of Lanao del Norte. In depth investigation of this particular case could have opened a Pandora's box on the intention of the extremists.

The reports that were given by the tri-media had been that the Maute and the Abu Sayyaf groups were almost annihilated and were pushed into the mountains. The information is almost always coming from the security sector's spokesperson. In addition it was reported that Isnilon Hapilon was seriously wounded in these encounters and air strikes. But in the video shown by the security sector in the early stage of the Marawi rampage, Isnilon was shown together with the Maute brothers presiding over the planning to seize the Islamic City.

This kind of reporting has shown a serious gap in the appreciation of real and objective data or information about the Jihadists' movements and their activities. And only real and deep intelligent works could have analyzed these information; identifying and separating propaganda from the objective facts. Preparation and appropriate actions should be based on or guided by these validated facts.

This made not a few people to think that when the Maute had declared in the last quarter of last year to take over Marawi and burn it and President Duterte dared them to do it and said that he (President) would declare martial law could be a well thought decision by the latter. But nobody had made a profound analysis of the signs at the time and what was behind in the Presidential statement.

The unfolding events after the warning of the President would strongly lead to a disaster waiting to happen in Marawi. The intelligence works of the security sector in the area could hardly manifest that some activities by extremists leading to the take over of the city were detected. They have failed miserably.

In fact, there were obvious signs that the Maute group had made their moves in the first quarter of this year as shown by the information gathered by the security sector when it raided an apartment occupied by the Maute's relatives in the campus of the Mindanao State University (MSU). There was also the information that the President himself had announced in his speeches in the last few days that some politicians had connived with the Maute Jihadists to bring in weapons and stockpile them in Marawi before the siege.

The politicians that the President was referring must be the former Mayor of Marawi and his brother who lost in last year's election for the Mayorship of Marawi but both were met by the President in the last part of the 1st quarter of this year. What had happened in this special meeting in Davao City? Surely, they were not arrested during the meeting and yet their names are on the wanted list when martial law was declared in Mindanao.

And lately, the security sector and its spokespersons were telling the country through the media that they had early knowledge about the military training of the extremists including the participation of children and the planning of the Marawi takeover where no other than Isnilon Hapilon and the Maute brothers were seen in a video actively participating.

This vital information from the intelligence community must be the basis for the declaration of martial law in order to avoid civil war in Mindanao and secure the interest of the public. In fact the draft for Presidential Decree 216 must have already been prepared before the President and all his key security and defense officials went for a state visit in Moscow.

One has to take into account that the PD 216 was declared at 10pm on May 23, 2017, just few hours after the Maute

and Abu Sayyaf groups have rampaged the city of Marawi, after the failed joint military and police operation to arrest Isnilon Hapilon. So it must be the events before May 23, 2017 that President based his declaration of martial law in Mindanao.

If one takes the above-mentioned points into account, then the following questions are wanting to be answered; why did the President and his security sector allow these fanatic Jihadists to continue their stockpiling of arms and making logistical and technical preparation for the siege? Why was the 103rd Brigade of the 1st Infantry "Tabak" Division not reinforced and in fact continue to do its business as usual like allowing vacation and leave of its officers and the rank and file?

Why did the Brigade have a change of command just before the Marawi siege? Why did the PNP provincial command not make some preemptive actions? Why did the Local Government Units not act against the unusual activities by religious extremists in the city and neighboring municipalities? Why did the MSU administration as well as other educational and Islamic institutions no done something when the Mautes were openly campaigning and recruiting students and teachers to their Jihadist plan in their campuses as well as in social media?

The answers and the attention given to the questions would have prevented the declaration of martial law in Mindanao. They could have save Marawi from ruin and into deep crises it has suffered now. They could have prevented the dislocation and destruction of the city's population and their homes and livelihood.

Or is it a case of the intelligence community having the correct data and information but miserably failing to appreciate them as correctly mentioned by Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana?

There must be other reasons for the President to immediately declare martial law in Mindanao and possibly other parts of the country later. The Marawi is a necessary collateral damage in a bigger and complex picture of a new development paradigm in an undemocratic framework.

Building by Destroying

In the interview (the only interview) of a Marawi based broadcast journalist to the Maute spokesperson Abu Hafs few days after the extremists took over the city, the journalist asked the spokesperson about the Islamists' reasons in taking over the city. The candid answer of Abu Hafs was to forcibly implement Sharia Law in the Islamic City of Marawi. Furthermore, the spokesperson had emphasized that they wanted the people of the city to sacrifice their lives and properties for the total implementation of Sharia Law. In addition, Abu Hafs said that these sacrifices are nothing compared to the favor Allah (SWT) will give them soon.

The danger of distorted understanding of a religion which is founded on peace can inflict serious destruction both spiritually and physically to people who are deprived of their inherent right to decide for their lives and future. For the fanatics there is no room for people who do not follow their literal interpretation and obedience to Sharia Law. For these extremists the kafirs (unbelievers-Christians) do not have the right to share the world with them.

At this point, one cannot help but be reminded about the present government's campaign against illegal drugs. The drug users are mainly seen not as victims but undesirable elements of society and should be eliminated in whatever forms and means in order to save the nation especially the young people from perdition.

There is no room for healing, dialogue and understanding of other faiths and their predicament. It is as if saying that

their destruction (killing and elimination) will be the basis for building a nation. Or in the case of the fanatical Maute's belief that true Muslims can only enjoy in the afterlife not in this world of human beings who share the natural resources with all other living things.

Furthermore, one easily compare the logic behind the declaration of martial law in Mindanao. Democracy cannot be saved by destroying it even if it is expressed in the most beautiful way. Public safety can be achieved by securing and promoting the environment for the promotion and attaining all sided development of the public's well-being.

Marawi cannot be saved and rebuilt without its people's well-being as its paramount objective. And this can only be done with people's active participation in all the stages of its rebuilding and strengthening. The Marawi's siege and the declaration of martial law should not be a cover up of the failure of the security sector to ensure public safety as well as the obvious failure of the illegal drug campaign of the government. Securing the well being of the people shall be doing concrete actions to resolve the causes of the proliferation of illegal drugs like poverty and social inequities.

One should take into account that while the Maute and Abu Sayyaf are doing their rampage in Marawi, illegal drug related killings have intensified in other parts of the country. Everybody is made to understand and witness the events of the connivance of drug lords and the extremists and terrorist groups in the burning and ruining of Marawi City. One should not be surprised that the government's answer to this phenomenon in other parts of the country is martial law.

Solidarity Amidst Conflicts

Extraordinary solidarity from below is developing but has been overshadowed by big events of the offensives and counter-offensives by the extremists and the security sector of the Philippine government in Marawi City.

Not a few instances, one could witness the protection of the Moro civilians and employers of their Christian workers against the threats of the Jihadists. The Moro Muslims have shown their willingness to lay down their lives first if the Mautes would kill their Christian workers. In several cases the Christian men were made to dress like the Muslim Maranao and the Christian women were made to put on hijab to facilitate their safe escape.

Both the Moro and Christian would help each other to survive while they were trapped in the buildings in the city against the artillery shells and aerial bombings of the AFP and the Maute's sniper fires. The Muslims would not escape because the extremists might kill the Christians if they would be left behind.

On the other hand, it is mostly Christian humanitarian volunteers who went out their way in Iligan City and the neighboring places to help the Moro Internally Displaced Person (IDPs) to help lessen their burden both physically and psychologically to survive during these trying times.

This kind of solidarity developing from below must have been the reasons that the intrigues and the biases between the Moros and Christians that some sectors would want to revive could not simply succeed.

It is as if the Marawi crises have created new opportunities for an interfaith solidarity to be strengthened. That those decades of peaceful co-existing in Marawi and freely practicing and professing their faith have been put into test but the Moro/Muslim majority and the Christian minority in the city have weathered them and further tempered their solidarity.

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It is this type of heroism by ordinary people which is given less projection in the media. One could not describe for instance the feeling of seeing ordinary Christian humanitarian volunteers giving relief food and non-food items to both the rich and the poor Moro/Muslim IDPs. One of the results of the current human made disaster like the Marawi crises is that it becomes social equalizer. One can oftentimes see the rich and the poor mixing together transcending the social divide and their Maratabat (self-pride) to receive the help of Christian humanitarian volunteers.

Another reality brought about by this humanitarian crisis in Marawi is that the Moro/Maranaos do not stay in the evacuation centers. According to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) only 5% of the almost 350,000 IDPs can be found in the Evacuation Centers (ECs) and 95% of them stay in their relatives' houses. One can just imagine the almost heroic efforts of the Christian humanitarian volunteers to find and help those 95% of the IDPs in the private houses of the Moro/Muslim in the City like Iligan and the neighboring municipalities.

In addition, one can also find Christian religious institutions and congregations houses open up their doors as sanctuaries for those IDPs who have experienced human rights violations and would need special care and protection.

Furthermore, international humanitarian donors and solidarity groups have exerted tireless efforts to collect relief funds and goods to timely help Marawi's IDPs. Their show of utmost concern to the plight of the IDPs in Mindanao made them extend their solidarity and friendship to the IDPs and the peoples of Marawi and Mindanao.

This kind of solidarity from above is the best preventive action that can neutralize if not stop the hatred based solidarity of the ISIS to the Maute/Abu Sayyaf extremist to use religion to force other people to follow them.

The solidarity both from below and from above (International solidarity) is the best answer to the International Jihadists' movement and divisive activities.

In two days from now, the Muslim world will celebrate the Eid al-Fit'r or the official end of the month of Ramadan and of the month-long fasting of Muslims. The solidarity between the Moro/Muslim and the Christians will be further put into test. There are strong indications that the Moro/Muslim or the Maranaos will also end their inaction in what is happening to their city. The traditional as well as the civilian leaderships will try to do something to recover their own city and will not anymore let the security sector of the government alone to continue their countersiege to retake the city.

Either they will directly talk and negotiate (with or without the President's approval) with the fanatic extremists or they will do intra-tribal solution. They can always find all those related to the people involved in burning and ruining their city and then make them accountable – in a clannish framework of rido [vendetta].

The Christians can engage their Moro/Muslim brothers and sisters into intense dialogue and active peacebuilding. It can be done in the interfaith and dialogue frameworks and help in countering the Salafist/Jihadists ideology into building the communities based on trust and understanding. It can also be done in promoting a liberative religion which can only be holistic and inclusive. A belief that the liberation of persons is not only in the spiritual aspect but from economic deprivation, political isolation and cultural alienation as well.

It can also be done by spreading and living the message of Ramadan that is cleansing not only spiritually but also against self-centeredness and exclusivity in our different ethnic and multi-nationalities nation. That authentic religion can only be a free choice of everybody and that it (religion) cannot be the basis in building a nation.

Defending and strengthening a city or a nation is everybody's business not only by the security sector much less by a President even if he is the most popular leader in the country.

Securing the interest of people and protecting its democratic institutions cannot and can never be done by eliminating people and destroying democracy by the few.

The Peace Process and Martial Law

When President Marcos declared martial law in the whole country in 1972, his main reason was to stop the rebellion by both the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). At that time, the MNLF had just started to build up their forces and their strength. They first tested them in 1974 with famous battles at Jolo, Marawi and Upi. In Jolo alone, 20,000, both combatants and non-combatants, were killed and 40,000 residents were dislocated. The CPP was still in its early sub-stage of its strategic defensive when Marcos declared martial law.

When the dictator was ousted in 1986, 14 years after he declared martial law, the CPP could claim to have reached its strategic counter offensive in which in 1972 the CPP had only a few hundreds members and a few dozens of weapons in the New People's Army (NPA) but reached to 26,000 members of Red fighters and more than 30,000 full member of the CPP in 1986. The MNLF has not only developed into regular formations of its armed components but has even internationalized its struggle for the right to self-determination. It has been recognized by the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) then and Organization of Islamic Cooperation now as the only legitimate representative of the Moro people.

Both the CPP and MNLF have claimed that the martial law and the dictatorial manner of governance by President Marcos were their best recruiter.

Martial law at that time made no positive impact on the socio-economic lives of most of the country's population, in fact it worsened peoples' lives.

President Marcos, the dictator, used full military means to confront the insurgency questions, but it ended up promoting and strengthening the insurgents' rank and file and their cause.

It will not be different with President Duterte's declaration of martial law. He can not definitely solve the socio-economic problem like the insurgency and rebellion by applying a purely military solution, even if the country is confronted seriously by the terrorists like the Maute and the Abu Sayyaf as in the case of Marawi City.

Other sectors and stakeholders should be involved in facing the terrorists' threats and managing rebellion.

Everybody should give and support more stress and attention in reaching political settlements with revolutionary groups and the Moro Liberation Fronts. The terrorists should never be allowed to make foothold and take roots in the rural and urban areas by effective and sustainable poverty alleviation programs and social services.

Peace Processes and peace negotiation should address the resolution of the root causes of the rebellion not only in the negotiating tables but more so on concrete steps done on the ground with the communities of peoples.

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The form of the government like federation should be the result of a true and democratic consultation with all the stakeholders. It cannot be done under the framework of martial law.

Concrete political solutions to the root causes of the insurgency should be achieved in a full democratic framework. Martial law cannot provide the appropriate atmosphere in reaching a mutually-agreed solution.

It is important to take into account that the CPP has initiated tactical offensives outside and even in Mindanao. It should be obvious that the Party leadership is setting a trap for President Duterte to declare martial law as well in the whole country, just like what the Dictator Marcos did in 1972. The CPP knows that the Duterte administration will be drawn to make undemocratic moves and become more repressive in governing the country. This can create an intensification of contradictions of different groups and classes in the country pushing Duterte to become dictator and can be easily weakened and isolated.

President Duterte has also promised to approve and sign the current draft of the Bangsamoro Basic Law but its full implementation will be in the second half of his term as President. It will be in the context when the 1987 Philippine Constitution has been revised to fit the change of the form of the government into a federal one where the MILF will have its prominent role. But the President should make sure that the 17th Congress of both legislative houses will approve the draft BBL.

Under martial law, the Constitution will be revised and elections in 2019 will be held. But there will be substantial developments in the country two years from now. The coming Barangay elections should have been postponed in October of this year. The President will be appointing all the barangay officials in the country. In the case of Marawi and Lanao del Sur, the government will be virtually creating its own armed militias called Civilian Defense Force (CDF) composed of 13 appointed Barangay officials and 13 civilians.

There will be big infrastructure and economic projects in Mindanao as the aid and loans coming from China or maybe Russia are coming in. In the framework of martial law, the government can easily hurdle the problems that it will encounter with regards to its new development paradigm.

And for the MILF it should be allowed to set up the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) to replace the current Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and prepare for a democratic elections in 2019.

Meanwhile the President should help provide the annual budget of the Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC) to enable it to perform its functions in preparation of setting up the BTA. It is important to note that since last year the President has not given the BTC its budget almost paralyzing its function.

The obvious fact today, is that the President wants to focus his attention and the strength of the AFP and PNP in ending the Marawi crises. The tactical offensives of the NPAs in Palawan, Iloilo, Samar and in Davao do not get the Presidents attention for now. The government cannot afford to spread thinly its very limited assets and resources. Opening another or several fronts will be a sure formula for a disaster.

The President has manifested the burden of growing old and facing a complicated and multi-faceted problems of the country is making a toll on his health. And since the President has shown to be a good student of history he will not want to prolong any longer the Martial Law in Mindanao or dare to declare it in the whole country. His current relationship with the US will not assure its help in flying him and his family safely out of the country. China and Russia are still too far away.

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June 23, 2017

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