



People walk in front of a bullet-riddled apartment house in a residential area in Malutlut district, Marawi city, southern Philippines which was believed to have been rented by pro-Islamic State militant group leaders Isnilon Hapilon and Omar Maute before their battle in Marawi city. **REUTERS/Romeo Ranoco**

# The Battle for Marawi

BY **ROMEO RANOCO, ROLING, TOM ALLARD AND MARTIN PETTY**

**MAY 25 – OCTOBER 28** MARAWI CITY

# Manila deploys commandos, helicopters to retake city from Islamists

BY ROMEO RANOCO AND ROLING

MAY 25 MARAWI CITY

**T**he Philippines mobilised attack helicopters and special forces to drive Islamic State-linked rebels out of a besieged southern city on Thursday, with six soldiers killed in street combat amid heavy resistance.

Ground troops hid behind walls and armoured vehicles and exchanged volleys of gunfire with Maute group fighters, shooting into elevated positions occupied by militants

who have held Marawi City on Mindanao island for two days.

Helicopters circled the city, peppering Maute positions with machine gun fire to try to force them from a bridge vital to retaking Marawi, a mainly Muslim city of 200,000 where fighters had torched and seized a school, a jail and a cathedral, and took more than a dozen hostages.

“Our troops are doing deliberate operations in areas we believe are still occupied or infested with the terrorist presence,” said the head of the task force, Brigadier General Rolly Bautista.

The battles with the Maute group, which has pledged allegiance to Islamic State, started on Tuesday during a failed raid by security forces on one of the group’s hideouts that spiralled into chaos.

Eighteen rebels were killed on Thursday, the army said.

The turmoil was the final straw for President Rodrigo Duterte, who on Tuesday delivered on his longstanding threat to impose martial law on Mindanao, the country’s second-largest island, to stop the spread of radical Islam.

“If there’s an open defiance you will die,” he said on Wednesday. “And if it means many people dying, so be it.”

Islamic State claimed responsibility late on Wednesday for Maute’s activities via its Amaq news agency.

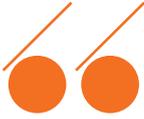
At least 46 people – 15 security forces and 31 rebels – have been killed and religious leaders say militants were using Christians taken hostage during the fighting as human shields. The status of those hostages was not known.

The White House condemned the Maute group as “cowardly terrorists” and said the United States was a proud ally of the Philippines and backed its fight against extremism.

## GETTING OUT

Hundreds of civilians had sheltered in a military camp in Marawi City as troops helped clear the few remaining people from streets where smoke lingered in the air.

“We’re leaving,” said a resident named



Based on  
our intel-  
ligence,  
Isnilon  
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the city.



**Jo-Ar Herrera**  
Spokesman for the  
First Infantry  
Regiment

Edith, walking along a rundown street carrying a small suitcase. “We can no longer take it and we need to save our children.”

Sultan Haji Ismael Demasala said he was staying and would leave his fate in God’s hands. “If Allah wills it so, then we cannot stop it,” he said, pointing his finger in the air.

Marawi is located in Lanao del Sur province, a stronghold of the Maute, a fierce, but little-known group that has been a tricky opponent for the military.

Military leaders say the Maute’s motivation for taking the city was to raise its profile and earn recognition from Islamic State.

Tuesday’s raid was aimed at capturing Isnilon Hapilon, a leader of radical faction of another militant group, the Abu Sayyaf. The government says Hapilon is a point man for Islamic State in the Philippines and has been collaborating with the Maute leaders.

“Based on our intelligence, Isnilon Hapilon is still in the city,” said Jo-Ar Herrera, spokesman for the First Infantry Regiment.

The Maute group’s rise is a source of concern for Mindanao native Duterte, who is familiar with Muslim separatist unrest but alarmed by the prospect of rebels helping Islamic State to recruit and establish a presence in the volatile region of 22 million people.

The president held a cabinet meeting on Thursday in Davao, his home city and the biggest on Mindanao.

Security was stepped up in Davao, with more military checkpoints and some businesses sending staff home during daylight hours. Residents were urged to stay vigilant.

In the city where Duterte was mayor for 22 years, and enjoys a cult-like following, residents were supportive of martial law.

“It’s not a hassle. It is good because it prevents harmful events,” said manicurist Zoraida Jakosalem Himaya. “He is like a father telling his children what to do.” 

Additional reporting by **Neil Jerome Morales** in Davao City and **Enrico Dela Cruz** and **Manuel Mogato** in Manila; Editing by **Tom Heneghan**

# Seizing of Philippines city by Islamist militants a wake-up call for Southeast Asia

BY TOM ALLARD

JUNE 3 MARAWI CITY

**A**t the beginning of the battle that has raged for the past 12 days in Marawi City at the southern end of the Philippines, dozens of Islamist militants stormed its prison, overwhelming the guards.

“They said ‘surrender the Christians’,” said Faridah P. Ali, an assistant director of the regional prison authority. “We only had one Christian staff member so we put him with the inmates so he wouldn’t be noticed,” he said.

Fighters from the Maute group, which

has pledged allegiance to Islamic State (IS), menaced the guards and shouted at prisoners: but no one gave up the Christian man. “When they freed the inmates, he got free,” said Ali.

It was a brief moment of cheer, but over the next few hours the militants took control of most of the city, attacked the police station and stole weapons and ammunition, and set up roadblocks and positioned snipers on buildings at key approaches. The assault has already led to the death of almost 180 people and the vast majority of Marawi’s population of about 200,000 has fled.

The seizing of the city by Maute and its allies on the island of Mindanao is the biggest warning yet that the Islamic State is building a base in Southeast Asia and bringing the brutal tactics seen in Iraq and Syria in recent years to the region.

Defence and other government officials from within the region told Reuters evidence is mounting that this was a sophisticated plot to bring forces from different groups who support the Islamic State together to take control of Marawi.

The presence of foreigners – intelligence sources say the fighters have included militants from as far away as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Chechnya and Morocco – alongside locals in Marawi, has particularly alarmed security officials.

For some time, governments in Southeast Asia have been worried about what happens when battle-hardened Islamic State fighters from their countries return home as the group loses ground in the Middle East, and now they have added concerns about the region becoming a magnet for foreign jihadis.

“If we do nothing, they get a foothold in this region,” said Hishammuddin Hussein, the defence minister of neighbouring Malaysia.

Defence and military officials in the Philippines said that all four of the country’s pro-Islamic State groups sent fighters to Marawi with the intention of establishing the city as a Southeast Asian ‘wilayat’ – or governorate – for the radical group.

Mindanao – roiled for decades by Islamic separatists, communist rebels, and warlords – was

fertile ground for Islamic State's ideology to take root. This is the one region in this largely Catholic country to have a significant Muslim minority and Marawi itself is predominantly Muslim.

It is difficult for governments to prevent militants from getting to Mindanao from countries like Malaysia and Indonesia through waters that have often been lawless and plagued by pirates.

The Combating Terrorism Center, a West Point, New York-based think tank, said in a report this week that Islamic State is leveraging militant groups in Southeast Asia to solidify and expand its presence in the region. The key will be how well it manages relations with the region's jihadi old guard, CTC said.

### **COMMANDER FIRED**

The Maute group's attack is the biggest challenge faced by Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte since coming to power last June. He has declared martial law in Mindanao, which is his political base.

His defence forces were caught off guard by the assault and have had difficulty in regaining control of the city – on Saturday they were still struggling to wipe out pockets of resistance.

On Monday, Brigadier-General Nixon Fortes, the commander of the army brigade in Marawi, was sacked.

An army spokesman said this was unrelated to the battle. But a military source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Reuters on Friday that Fortes was dismissed because not all his forces were in the city when the rebels began their rampage, even though military intelligence had indicated that Islamist militants were amassing there.

The assault came just months after security forces attacked the mountain lair of Isnilon Hapilon, a long-time leader of Abu Sayyaf, or "Father of the Sword", a notorious Islamist militant group known for kidnapping.

He swore allegiance to Islamic State in 2014, and quickly got other groups to join him. Most important among them was the Maute group, run by brothers Omar and Abdullah

Maute from a well-known family in Marawi.

In a video that surfaced last June, a Syria-based leader of the group urged followers in the region to join Hapilon if they could not travel to the Middle East. Hapilon was named IS leader in Southeast Asia last year.

The Philippines military said Hapilon was likely wounded in the raids but managed to escape to Marawi, where he joined up with the Maute group.

According to a statement on a social media group used by Maute fighters, the group wants to cleanse Marawi of Christians, Shi'ite Muslims, and polytheists – who believe in more than one God. It also wants to ban betting, karaoke and so-called "relationship dating."

### **MOUNTAIN LAIRS**

Some officials said Philippines security forces became complacent about the threat from IS after the January raids.

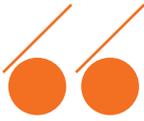
"We did not notice they have slipped into Marawi because we are focusing on their mountain lairs," Philippines Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana told reporters.

Over the past few months, Philippine and Indonesian intelligence sources said, Hapilon's forces were swelled by foreign fighters and new recruits within Marawi. Many of the outsiders came to Marawi using the cover of an Islamic prayer festival in the city last month, said Philippines military spokesman Lt. Col. Jo-Ar Herrera.

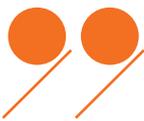
Lorenzana said that Hapilon brought 50-100 fighters to join Maute's 250-300 men, while two other groups, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and the Ansar Al-Khilafah Philippines, together brought at least 40 militants with them.

On May 23, four days before the start of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, they launched their attack when Philippine forces made an abortive attempt to capture Hapilon inside Marawi.

After the military retreated in the face of a phalanx of armed guards, about 400 militants



ISIS people were running on the street, running away from them. They were bombing them in the street (but) it hit our house and the mosque. Many other houses too.



**Amerah Dagalangit**  
A pregnant 29-year-old in an evacuation centre near Marawi

quickly fanned out across the city, riding trucks mounted with 50-calibre machine guns and armed with rocket-propelled grenades and high-powered rifles.

Within hours, they attacked the jail and nearby police station, seizing weapons and ammunition, according to accounts from residents.

The Dansalan College, a Protestant institution, and the Catholic Cathedral of Maria Auxiliadora, were both razed, and a priest and about a dozen other parishioners captured. They remain hostages.

A Shi'ite mosque was also destroyed, and a statue of Jose Rizal, the Philippines hero of the uprising against Spanish rule, was beheaded.

### SNIPERS ON ROOFTOPS

Herrera said the attack had the hallmarks of a professional military operation. "There was a huge, grand plan to seize the whole of Marawi," he said.

After the initial battle, IS flags flew across the city and masked fighters roamed the streets proclaiming Marawi was theirs, using loud-hailers to urge residents to join them and handing out weapons to those who took up the offer, according to residents.

The military brought in helicopters to fire rockets at militant positions as ground troops began to retake key bridges and buildings, though some residents this has also led to the deaths of civilians.

"ISIS people were running on the street, running away from them. They were bombing them in the street (but) it hit our house and the mosque. Many other houses too," said Amerah Dagalangit, a pregnant 29-year-old in an evacuation centre near Marawi.

"Many people died when the bomb exploded," she said, adding that a Muslim priest and children were among the victims.

Military officials said they had not received any report of the incident. Reuters could not independently verify the account.

The military has said 20 civilians have been killed in the fighting and that all were at the

hands of the militants. It also says 120 rebels and 38 members of the security forces have been killed, including 10 soldiers who died from friendly fire in an airstrike.

### "PEOPLE WILL GET KILLED"

Officials in neighbouring Indonesia worry that even if the Filipinos successfully take back Marawi in coming days, the threat will still remain high.

"We worry they will come over here," said one Indonesian counter-terrorism official, noting that Mindanao wasn't very far from the Indonesian island of Sulawesi.

More than 2,000 people remain trapped in the centre of Marawi, with no electricity and little food and water. Some are pinned down by the crossfire between the military and the militants, while others fear they will be intercepted by the militants as they flee, according to residents.

The bodies of eight labourers who had been shot in the head were found in a ravine outside Marawi last Sunday. The police said they had been stopped by the militants while escaping the city.

There will most likely be more civilian casualties in retaking the city, the military said.

"We are expecting that people will get starved, people will get hurt, people will get killed," said Herrera, the military spokesman. "In these types of operations, you can't get 100 per cent no collateral damage." 

Additional Reporting by **Manuel Mogato**; Editing by **Raju Gopalakrishnan** and **Martin Howell**

# Koran, boots and scarves all that remain in Philippine rebel leader's lair

BY MARTIN PETTY

OCTOBER 28 MARAWI CITY

**P**rayer mats, chequered scarves, black fatigues, and bullet-ridden walls mark the hideout where the “emir” of Islamic State in Southeast Asia spent months preparing the most brazen and devastating militant attack in the region.

A four-storey house in a quiet alley of Marawi City in the southern Philippines was the secret lair of Isnilon Hapilon until late May. After a botched military raid to apprehend him,

a thousand-strong rebel alliance held large parts of the city for five months.

Hapilon's death in a military operation elsewhere in Marawi on Oct. 16 was the catalyst for the end of Philippines' longest and most intense urban battle in recent history.

Security forces moved in on the house on May 23, trying to capture the country's most wanted man, but came under sustained attack from rebels firing rocket-propelled grenades.

A bomb-battered structure, shattered windows and wall-to-wall holes from machine gun fire tell the story of the ferocious three-day battle that erupted at Hapilon's hideout, and prompted the call to hundreds of fighters to expedite the planned takeover of Marawi.

Hapilon escaped through a large hole that was blasted out of a rear wall, making his way across a rice field to a mosque next to the vast Lake Lanao. From there, he joined the guerrillas.

Community volunteers on Thursday showed Reuters the house in the now empty, narrow street where the military believes Hapilon had lain low for several months. All other properties were intact and neighbours had fled long ago.

“At the time, no one knew who these people were. People saw them about but there was no reason to suspect anything,” said Mohammed Seddick Raki, who lived nearby.

Other volunteers said women and children stayed at the rented house and visitors were frequent.

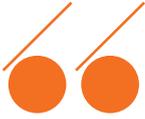
Children's shoes were scattered amid the debris and a woman's robe was hanging from a window.

## BATTLE READY

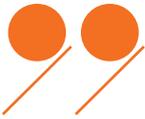
Inside the house, black shirts, pants and plaid scarves synonymous with Islamic State were strewn across rooms littered with broken floor tiles and chunks of rock from blasted walls.

Left behind were waterproof boots, a balaclava, medical supplies and camouflage bags and waistcoats typically used by soldiers to carry rifle magazines.

Coated in a thin layer of dust on floors



No one could have known what would happen.



**Mohamed Faisal Mama**

A resident in the same Basak Malutlot district where Hapilon was hiding

of every room were pocket-sized copies of the Koran, some with pages stained by water leaked through gaping holes in the roof.

A mosque, about 100 metres behind the house, was the venue for an annual gathering in Marawi of Tablighi Jamaat, a Sunni missionary movement, just days before the fighting erupted.

Military officials say the foreigners who fought in Hapilon's alliance – among them Indonesians, Malaysians and some from Arab states – had used that event as a cover to slip into Marawi without raising suspicion.

The deputy task force commander in Marawi, Colonel Romeo Brawner, said Hapilon evaded security forces because rebels had a network of lookouts and gunmen ready to defend him.

“They put up heavy resistance. They were spread across a large area. They were strategically placed,” he said. “They were prepared for it.”

Hapilon's escape in the last week of May led to anarchy in the city of about 200,000. Rebels took hostages, set fire to buildings, ransacked churches, broke into the local jail to free inmates and looted an armoury.

The government had insufficient security forces in Marawi to prevent the fighters from fanning out across the city and seizing hundreds of buildings.

Hapilon was wanted by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and had a bounty on his head of up to \$5 million. He was killed by army rangers in a night operation and his body was retrieved from the battle zone in the heart of the city. His identity was confirmed by the FBI's DNA analysis.

The city of Marawi was all but destroyed by government air strikes and shelling that levelled commercial areas and crushed thousands of shops, homes and vehicles.

“No one could have known what would happen,” said Mohamed Faisal Mama, a resident in the same Basak Malutlot district where Hapilon was hiding.

“No one knew them. They weren't famous then.” 

Editing by **Raju Gopalakrishnan** and **Bill Tarrant**