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Philippines: Trapped residents must be protected in Marawi onslaught

The protection of residents trapped in Marawi City must be ensured by all parties to the ongoing armed confrontation between the Philippine Armed Forces and Maute group said Amnesty International.

The Philippine government has an obligation to protect the lives of trapped residents, who may also be facing severe shortages of food and water. In light of the huge risks to the lives of those trapped, residents must be able to safely evacuate from the city. Philippine security forces have an obligation to respect and ensure the human rights of all those who continue to be involved and caught up in the two week standoff.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned that after two weeks of clashes, up to 2000 ordinary people reportedly remain trapped in the heart of Marawi City after armed confrontations broke out between government forces and the Maute group on 23 May. The Maute group, which has pledged allegiance to the armed group calling itself Islamic State (IS), is still defending previously heavily populated areas in the centre of the city. On 4 June, a short pause in the fighting allowed over 100 people to be rescued. However, a leader of a team of rescuers told Amnesty International that since then, no one has been able to reach other trapped residents.

In a speech on 6 June, President Duterte told the military to “crush the enemy” to put an end to the siege. The President has previously said he would “flatten” Marawi through airstrikes, but for the presence of “children and civilians.” However, the President has also recognised his “duty to save lives” as airstrikes continue to pound Marawi City.

While the Philippine authorities can take legitimate measures to ensure security and arrest suspects, the operations currently being conducted by the security forces and military include airstrikes at targets in residential areas of Marawi City, as well as clashes with the Maute group characterised by gunfire and explosions of artillery shells. These security and military measures are being used with

significant risks to the lives and property of ordinary people caught up in the hostilities.

Amnesty International calls on the government of the Philippines to comply with its key human rights obligations, including the right to life, which cannot be suspended by the imposition of martial law and therefore remain fully in place for the ongoing onslaught on Marawi City. Amnesty International also calls on the Philippines government to take all measures necessary to ensure the protection of those caught up in the present situation.

Background

President Duterte declared martial law in the Philippines island of Mindanao on 23 May 2017, after fighting broke out between government forces and the Maute group in Marawi City.

One of a number of insurgency groups in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao that has shunned the peace process, the Maute group has reportedly formed an alliance with Abu Sayaff leader Isnilon Hapilon, who is also said to be the leader of the armed group calling itself Islamic State (IS) in the Philippines. Clashes in Marawi began when government forces learned Hapilon was in the city and launched a raid to arrest him. On the evening of 23 May, martial law was across Mindanao.

Under international human rights law, including treaties which the Philippines is a party to, the scope of martial law must be limited to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation. This requirement relates to the duration, geographical scope and any measures of derogation resorted to because of the emergency. Amnesty International has previously called on security forces to show utmost restraint during the imposition of martial law. A state of martial law does not suspend key human rights, including the right to life, the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment and the right to fair trial.

Over the years, Amnesty International has expressed concerns over impunity for violations of international human rights law by Philippine security forces as well as human rights abuses by paramilitaries and militia groups, particularly in Mindanao.