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Philippines

The Marawi Siege and the Declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao – Part IV

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Bomb! Burn! Build! This can be the briefest description one can have today in what has happened and possibly will happen to the only Islamic City of the pre-dominantly Christian country. The siege of Marawi is nearing its second month. The country's security sector has been surprised that it is taking longer time than what they had expected to wrest the control of the City from the Abu Sayyaf and the Maute group.

Obviously, the extremists Jihadists have manifested higher level in terms of preparation and resiliency than the security forces for this kind of prolonged urban warfare. Furthermore, the "fight to death" attitude has helped these Salafists/Jihadists face any kind of attacks, obstacles, shells and ammunitions thrown their way by the Philippine security forces to retake the besieged City of Marawi. Their network, including their intelligence organizations seems to still work effectively giving them enough time to do evasive actions or take shelter during ground AFP troops advance and aerial bombings.

The fanatic Jihadists have made use to the maximum their control and occupation of all the gasoline stations, banks and pharmacies to make bombs, purchase more guns and ammunitions and heal their wounded comrades. They do not need to go further away like Iligan and Cagayan de Oro cities to treat the wounded. According to survivors, they (Jihadists/terrorists) have built their own makeshift and mobile hospitals to give first aid and immediate treatment to their wounded comrades.

In addition, the pressures of deadlines for the security sector, have resulted to more casualties on the ground troops and the trapped civilians. Exerting more efforts to gain extra ground had exposed the advancing troops to the waiting terrorist snipers killing zones. The intensified aerial bombings could mean having higher possibility of hitting the trapped civilians as well.

It should be recalled that in a month, President Duterte had tried twice to visit the war-torn Marawi. The first attempt was on June 8, 2017 or on the 17th day of the Jihadists' rampage of Marawi and the second was on July 8 or on the 46th day of the siege of the Islamic City. But twice it was cancelled out, the reasons given to the postponements would be the unfavorable weather condition. But everybody knows that the Presidential security personnel would not allow their Commander-in-Chief to be exposed to the unfavorable security atmosphere in the battle zone of the war-torn city.

Last week, a third deadline was set by the President to end or finish the extremists' take-over of Marawi within 10 to 15 days. And again, people would not be surprised that the Commander-in-Chief will make another attempt to visit the besieged city or on before the conclusion of his self-declared deadline and before the State of the Nation Address (SONA) on July 24, 2017.

The burden of how to explain the non-accomplishment of the mission set by the President would be on the ground commanders and to the security sectors spokespersons, who are well aware about the real dynamics and the difficulties in engaging the fanatics in close quarter combat in unfamiliar ground and in a new type of urban warfare.

All the elite troops of the different branches of the country's security forces have been committed to engage the inferior trained but highly determined fanatics. The armed conflicts have been prolonged and intensified becoming bloodier everyday. To date, the list of casualties after almost two months are: 399 terrorists, 99 security forces and 45 civilians were killed. With regards to the wounded, only the security forces have the list of their members in the hospitals which have already reached more than 500. There is no data or list on the number of wounded for the

civilians and the terrorists.

At this point, it would be important to clarify the basis of the list of casualties especially of the Abu Sayyaf and Maute group. According to the spokespersons of the security sector, the 399 or 400 terrorists killed was based mainly on eyewitnesses which one would presume that these are from the spotters on the ground and the pilots of the aircrafts bombing the suspected terrorists' lairs. But this brings one to more questions as to reliability of the account of the spotters and the pilots who could only give their observations or account from a distance and how would they (pilots and spotters) distinguish the terrorists from the civilians still trapped in the same areas where the former are hiding?

The answers to such questions can definitely help one to have an objective estimate of the number of terrorists left after two months of non-stop fighting. The base number of more than 500 terrorists involved in the Marawi rampage came from the spokesperson of the security sector. That explains the number of 80 to 100 Jihadists left after having the 400 terrorists killed and those who have escaped.

Furthermore, the one square kilometer radius that the security sector has given to the terrorists remaining areas to maneuver is very difficult to determine and validate independently because of the coverage of the aerial bombings (more than a square kilometer) and the fierce resistance put up by the Jihadists in different strategic areas of the besieged city and definitely outside the 1 square kilometer mentioned by the AFP.

In addition, the incidents of "friendly fire" which killed 12 soldiers out of total 93 casualties and 18 out of 500 total wounded mentioned above, is related to limiting the area of the Mautes and the Abu Sayyaf in fifty one (51) days since the Marawi siege started. It is important to note that the different aircrafts in the bombing sprees or what the security sector spokesperson called surgical bombings have been using ordinary bombs and not the expensive precision-guided munitions or the PGMs. The ordinary bombs could not select their victims.

It is important to take note that those aircrafts (SF 260 and FA-50) used and made the "friendly bombs" have been put back to combat duty.

The results of the investigations of these aerial misbombings are very important in terms of lessons' learned since the principal method use in clearing the terrorists hiding in the different infrastructures in the city is by bombing them. In effect, this simply means that as long as there are still buildings standing in Marawi, the terrorists will have some places to hide. And to think that soldiers from the security sector can be hit by these unsurgical bombings then there are always possibilities that the trapped civilians can also be hit. There are still between 100 to 200 civilians trapped inside the besieged city including Fr. Teresito Suganob, 7 faculty members of the Dansalan College and 2 Mindanao State University (MSU) professors. Almost all of them are Christians and they are in serious danger of being killed anytime by the aerial bombings or by the terrorists who could use these hostages as human shields.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian crises spawned by the Marawi siege have worsen. There are a total of 410,457 persons or 89,589 families dislocated from Marawi City and the neighboring municipalities. Out of these, only 23,339 persons or 4,277 families are staying in 87 government identified evacuation centers (ECs) and 387,118 individuals or 85,312 families are staying in the homes of their relatives (home-based) mostly in Iligan City and the different municipalities of Lanao del Norte.

As mentioned in the previous articles, the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who are staying in their relatives' homes (home-based) have received less help in terms of food relief goods because of difficulties in identifying and locating them. According to the data from the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), there are 18,000 women out of the total displaced persons who need urgent help because 11,500 of these women are pregnant and 7,000 of them had given birth in the last six months (January to June 2017). Furthermore, there are 2,500 women who have

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already suffered mental problems and these women are just in the ECs. It is expected that there are more women IDPs in the HBs who have suffered both psychologically and physically but are not been officially listed and reported.

These anxieties and sufferings especially of women and children will continue even after the end of the military phase of the siege of Marawi. They know as shown by the media the extent of the ruins and the devastations of their city and their homes. They do not have anymore homes to go back to and where to start rebuilding their lives and families again. They lost everything and anything they have built for decades because of the extremists but they are also losing their dignity and whatever remains on them as persons because of Martial Law, which control their movements and lives even when they are in the evacuation centers. The IDPs are treated not only as victims but as less human with lesser rights.

Aside from the failed deadlines set by the leaders of the country as well as security sector, one can still expect that the military phase of the Marawi siege will be extended.

During the press conference by the spokespersons of the security sector last July 7, 2017, the number of the buildings still controlled by the extremists were around 800 buildings and that the AFP's ratio of clearing these buildings would be around 70-100 buildings per day so this means that it would take 2 weeks to complete the clearing works which will be on July 21, 2017 or before the 60 days deadline of Martial Law (July 22) and the SONA (July 24).

But on July 13 or almost a week after the said presscon, the AFP has scaled down its clearing capacity to around 40-50 buildings each day which means it (security sector) needs 10 to 12 days more to clear out the 70-80 terrorists left and are holding in the remaining buildings in Marawi. It is as if the presence of the Mautes or the terrorists in Marawi is synonymous with the number of buildings left still standing in the city. This simply means that only the total destruction and the flattening of Marawi is the only solution to have the Abu Sayyaf and the Maute group to be exterminated. Or it must be a case of the failure of intelligence sector to get the basic data on situation of the enemy or another case of having basic information but not properly appreciated.

It is in this context then that one can understand the decision of a group of Marawi women to declare "Enough is Enough", which means enough of the destruction, enough of "surgical" bombings of their homes and their city and enough of more sufferings in the evacuation centers and homes of their relatives. For these women, nobody can stop them and their determination to go back to their city and their homes to salvage what is left of their properties and from there rebuild their lives. They know very well the danger of being hit in the crossfires but they also know that nobody can rebuild their city and their lives other than themselves.

They have decided to go back to Marawi and get hold of rebuilding their own lives on July 24, 2017, the same day that President Duterte will make his second State of the Nation Address (SONA). For these simple but highly determined women, this act of going home can be symbolic for they do not know if they can successfully hurdle the roadblocks and challenges set by Martial Law along their way. But they are very clear of their message to get hold of their lives again and determine their own future and not by others even if they are the country's security forces or even if they are the terrorists who have sown the seeds of fear and destruction. They want to express themselves and put a stop for others to determine their lives for them even under the climate of Martial Law. This state of their situation of desperation and their determination are the messages that they want to express to the President when he delivers the State of the Nation Address (SONA).

Meanwhile, one of the topics of the President's SONA will be on his declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao. He will be reporting to the nation about the overwhelming support of the Supreme Court for the legal basis for his declaration and the geographical scope of such declaration which is the whole of Mindanao.

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But then again, one can see clearly now as the smokes clear the air and things begin to settle down, the siege of Marawi is the waited event to happen by the President and his defense and military circle to declare Martial Law in Mindanao. All the previous documents (from the 1st series to the third), questions were raised why nothing was done to stop the stockpiling of arms and ammunitions by the Abu Sayyaf and the Maute group in Marawi. There were intelligence information gathered by the security sector from the siege of Butig, the big armed encounter in the town of Piagapo, the so-called Presidential Security Group (PSG) ambush, the large quantity of explosives seized in the first quarter of this year and all of them are pointing the direction to Marawi. Nothing has been done to prevent and stop the terrorists plan to besiege the city as if the Marawi take-over of the Jihadists would have a role to play in the bigger political picture.

The 1987 Philippine Constitution says that Martial Law can only be declared when there is actual rebellion and invasion in the country or any part of it and when the public safety requires it. Martial Law cannot be declared using only the threats to public safety are detected. This provision in the Constitution (Article 7, Section 18) is intentionally put in place by framers of the 1987 Constitution to avoid the abuses of those in power and use Martial Law to justify their dictatorial plan and actions. One should not be surprised then that only a few hours after the terrorists rampage Marawi, the declaration of Martial Law has been issued not only in Marawi but the whole of Mindanao. That was the actual basis needed for the declaration of Martial Law. And to satisfy the specific provision of the Constitution, the Duterte Administration calls the seizure of Marawi by the terrorists as rebellion and invasion.

Both houses of Congress as well as the justices of the Supreme Court (except for one) should have seen not only what has actually happened in Marawi from May 23 up to the present but they should have studied the events before the actual siege to help them understand the bigger picture.

There were obvious built up of activities or even elaborate preparation by the terrorists before the seizure of Marawi. In the process, they (Congress and Supreme Court) could have seen that the rampage of Marawi could have been prevented and there would be no need to the declaration of Martial Law. Questions should be raised by both the Legislative and Judiciary branches of government why no sustainable or coherent actions were done to prevent the seizure of Marawi. The information gathered by the intelligence community was not intentionally appreciated.

They (Congress and Supreme Court) should not have abdicated their mandated Constitutional role in a democratic society and to check the repeat of having dictatorial regime and the creeping of Martial Law not only in Mindanao but to the whole country.

They (Congress and Supreme Court) could have listened also to the other and real stakeholders like the peoples affected by the war and the Martial Law – IDPs – the subject of the second point in the 1987 constitution on the legal basis of the declaration of Martial Law... the public safety requires it, in getting or completing their security briefing. They should not only listen to people who precisely did not do something to prevent the rampage and destruction of Marawi and the declaration of Martial Law. It is just like asking Dracula if he/she still wants to guard the Blood Bank.

There are indeed problems of illegal drugs and proliferation of undocumented guns in Marawi but then these are also true in other cities and provinces in the country including even in the City of Mayor (Presiding) Rodrigo Duterte.

The socio-economic and cultural aspects should be considered in addressing and solving these social ills. The root causes of such problems should be studied and that appropriate laws should be legislated to address these complicated social problems. All the stakeholders should be involved not only the executive and the security sector apparatus. The dictatorial manner of governance should not be used to justify the works of the Executive to conduct and fulfill its mandated duty to solve the problem of criminality, corruption, illegal drugs and terrorism.

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Everybody should have learned lessons from the Marcos dictatorship. The situation that the framers of 1987 Constitution intend to avoid has happened. The Congress and the Supreme Court which are supposed to put the check and balance have simply abdicated their mandate.

Under this context, it is very important to understand that Marawi has been bombed and burned and its people have been treated to a collective punishment. In several instances, one can find cases where Identification Cards (IDs) are required for Muslim Maranao especially coming from Marawi (Davao City and Pampanga). Islamophobia is indirectly encouraged and it is becoming widespread. The terrorists (Abu Sayyaf and Maute) have major role in the destruction of the city but the flattening of the city to the ground is caused by excessive force like bombs by the government security forces. And the loss of freedom and dignity of peoples from Marawi are done by Martial Law of the Duterte government. They become the necessary collateral damage to cover up the failures of the government in its war on drugs and corruption.

It will always be easy to put the blame on the terrorists about the severe damage and destruction of the Islamic City of Marawi. But the lost of dignity and freedom of the residents of the city have been inflicted by country's security forces, the Congress and the Supreme Court. The ruining of Marawi and the damage of the dignity and freedom of its residents could have been prevented if the country's democratic institutions have been alive and vigilant.

As it is seen today, the urban warfare for the control of Marawi has turned bloodier by the day. Gallantry and bravery of the country's security forces are witnessed by the world courtesy of the media and the modern technology. The level of bestiality shown by the terrorists on its Christian hostages has slowly been unfolded and exposed. The extraordinary solidarity shown by the non-combatants and civilians who are risking their lives to contribute positively by making more humane of more bearable the situations of the IDPs is very extraordinary. The solidarity developing from within among and between the humanitarian volunteers and the Internally Displaced Persons are witnessed everyday. And it has become stronger that even attempts of some fundamentalists to re-ignite the biases among and between the Muslims and Christians by distributing the Bibles (hidden inside the relief goods) to the Muslim IDPs, could not be successful in dividing the people. The solidarity from without or the different groups and individuals in and outside Mindanao and the country and their unending support for the most vulnerable section of the IDPs like the women, children and the elderly making their situation more bearable in the seemingly inhuman and despicable conditions in both the ECs and the HBs is becoming a brighter light at the end of the tunnel. It is sowing the seeds of inclusivism thus the antithesis of exclusivism by the extremists and the Jihadists is giving hope for the peace builders for a better and brighter world.

On July 24, 2017, President Duterte will report in his SONA about the liberation of Marawi and the sacrifices and heroism of the country's security forces. He will surely report about how bad he feels about the destruction of the city and the unfortunate effects on the Maranaos to which he claims and identifies to belong by blood. But surely, he will point to the Abu Sayyaf and the Maute groups as the culprits of all these damages and destructions.

Definitely, the President will not report to the nation that the seizure and burning of Marawi could have been prevented had the government security sector acted to prevent the obvious build up and preparatory activities of the terrorists. He will not also report that the attack in Marawi is the needed actual basis of the declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao.

And surely, the President will report to the nation about the success of Martial Law in thwarting the terrorists' plan to build a caliphate in Marawi and other parts of Mindanao. He will report about the plan to rebuild the ruined city and make it stronger and better than ever before. He will also give stress to the need to continue Martial Law to rebuild Marawi.

Furthermore, the President will also report in his SONA about the overwhelming support from both Houses of

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Congress and the Supreme Court. He will surely not report about the effects of the bullying methods done by himself and his security advisers about continuing Martial Law even without the support or despite the endorsement of both the Legislative and Judiciary branches of government. He could not be clear in delivering the message that it could only be the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP) that he would listen to and take advice from continuing with Martial Law.

The President will again ask both branches of government to support his program to deal with terrorism, anti-illegal drug campaign and anti-corruption campaigns and to do these campaigns successfully, he needs the iron hand. Specifically, the President will ask both Houses of Congress to grant his request of the extension of Martial Law in Mindanao.

Moreso, the President will also ask the support of the nation to his campaign on illegal drugs, anti-terrorism and anti-corruption. He will ask everybody to support his model of development and building a nation like in the case of rebuilding Marawi City. He needs everybody's support to continue governing under Martial Law to succeed in all of these.

But the President will not consult the most affected stakeholders by the seizure of Marawi and the declaration of Martial Law - the IDPs and the peoples of Marawi. These people have been pleading to the government and the security sector to lift-up Martial Law and stop the indiscriminate bombings of their city. They are doing these not because they support Maute and the terrorists. But they are doing these because they know that they can contribute in ending the war soonest by driving out the terrorists and rebuild their own lives and their city. And they are doing the best that they can afford to salvage of what is left with their properties and reclaim their rights and dignity.

Furthermore, the President will not mention that several Bishops have expressed their serious concerns of extending the period of Martial Law in Mindanao. The Ulama and the religious groups have been strengthening the solidarity with those belonging to other faiths to close their ranks and to call for the immediate end of Martial Law in Mindanao and in Marawi.

Surely, the President will not mention about the daily sufferings of the victims of human rights violations in Marawi, who have to transfer places to stay every week notwithstanding where to get their daily food because the operatives of the security sector are following and monitoring them.

And, President Duterte will surely not mention about the urgent concerns of the Mindanao business group led by Davao City Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Inc. (DCCCI) and its president Ronald Go of not extending Martial Law because of the decline of the tourism related businesses caused by the decline of tourists arrival due to the advisories of the different governments of many countries. To date, around 12,000 Korean tourists have just cancelled their bookings in different hotels in Mindanao because of Martial Law.

The President will not listen to these types of voices. Again, he will only listen to those people responsible for the failure of preventing the seizure of Marawi; its destruction and dislocation of its people. He will continue to make moves so that other branches of government will simply abdicate their Constitutional duty.

But the people will surely listen to these voices from the ground and will surely act based on the signs of the times which are daily unfolding right on their faces.

July 17, 2017

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