

**DECLINE IN VIOLENCE BY THE ABU
SAYYAF GROUP AND ONGOING
RISKS**

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Contents

I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. FAILED ATTEMPTS TO CONTAIN THE ASG	1
III. THE RISE OF ISIS AND THE SIEGE OF MARAWI.....	4
IV. SURRENDER AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS IN BASILAN	5
A. E-CLIP and PAVE	6
B. PAVE and the establishment of BARMM.....	7
C. Ongoing Challenges	9
V. A NEW SECURITY APPROACH IN SULU.....	10
A. Task Force Sulu and the 11th Infantry Division.....	11
B. Decline in violence.....	12
C. Surrender and reintegration programs	14
VI. CONCLUSIONS	19

I. INTRODUCTION

Extremist violence in Basilan and Sulu, strongholds of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the southern Philippines, has decreased substantially since 2017, due in part to the crushing of the ASG's Basilan group in the Marawi siege and the unrelenting military operations in Marawi's aftermath. The decline of ISIS in the Middle East and the drying up of ISIS funding have also been factors.

In the past, various ASG factions, driven by a desire for status, income, and revenge, have shown a remarkable ability for regeneration after military crackdowns. This time, ASG members may have changed their calculus in light of a 2017 shift in military strategy that has focused more on incentives for surrender and reintegration of ASG fighters than on combat alone.

The Philippine government is confident that the ASG is on its last legs, but it is too soon to know where the surrenderees will end up or how many of them will remain inactive. It would be a major mistake to write them off as no longer a threat.

To sustain current gains, the government needs to understand more about who is surrendering and why, paying particular attention to age and to the exact nature of their role in the ASG. It needs to understand per capita costs because the surrender and reintegration programs in their different manifestations depend on financial incentives and monetary payouts to a variety of parties, leaving them open to corruption as well as to questions of sustainability. There is no agreement about whether the programs should be nationally coordinated, locally run or a hybrid of the two.

It is also important to recognise that the ASG, like many other extremist groups, is also a social community and that it is not that easy to sever ties between former combatants. Nor will it be easy for former ASG members to find employment with little education or training other than in the field. Some may end up working as members of militias or private armed groups, but such positions will not advance the cause of peace.

The ASG is the best known of the extremist groups operating in the island provinces, but both the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have combatants there, as a deadly clash in November 2022 between MILF fighters and government soldiers underscored. Keeping an eye on the other armed groups operating in Basilan and Sulu along with reviewing the military's continual dominance in the region will also be critical for sustaining the present lull in violence.

II. FAILED ATTEMPTS TO CONTAIN THE ASG

The ASG was once among the most feared of the armed groups operating in the Philippines, both for its kidnapping and extortion activities as well as for its links to terrorism.

Founded in 1991 by Aburajak Janjalani, a Middle Eastern-trained preacher from Basilan committed to the establishment of an Islamic state in Mindanao, it quickly developed ties to

al-Qaeda.¹ Most ASG members were ethnic Tausug or Yakan who were either followers of Janjalani, inspired by al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan or disgruntled MNLF members who opposed the peace process with the Philippine government.² Abdurajak Janjalani died in a police operation in Basilan in 1998, and his younger brother Khadafi Janjalani took over as leader.

From the beginning, the ASG was a highly decentralised organisation, described as “an alliance of smaller groups around individual charismatic leaders who compete and cooperate to maximise their reputation for violence” and their ability to extract ransom payments through high-profile kidnappings.³

The group gained international notoriety in 2000 with a spectacular raid on an island resort in neighbouring Malaysia, where six ASG gunmen abducted 21 guests and resort staff and took them to Jolo by speedboat. Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi, who had brokered the 1976 peace agreement between the Philippine government and the MNLF, offered help in negotiating with the ASG.⁴ Most of the hostages were released after Gaddafi pledged millions in ransom money labelled as ‘development aid’ to the impoverished region of Muslim Mindanao.⁵ By this time, the number of ASG members had grown from a few hundred to over 1,000 by AFP estimates and twice that by U.S. intelligence estimates.⁶

Kidnappings for ransom continued, as did ASG’s contacts with al-Qaeda. In May 2001, ASG gunmen kidnapped 20 people, including three U.S. citizens from the Dos Palmas resort island in Palawan. One of the Americans was beheaded a few weeks later. The kidnappers demanded a ransom of USD 1 million for each hostage along with the release of Ramzi Yousef, the Al-Qaeda operative responsible for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, who had links to the Philippines.⁷

The U.S. military began a joint rescue operation with the Philippines government to free the American hostages. Their role was limited to Basilan and to non-combat operations,

¹ The link was through Osama bin Laden’s brother-in-law, Jamal Khalifa who was then running the Philippines office of the International Islamic Relief Organization. For a full account of the ASG’s links to al-Qaeda see Quinton Temby, “Cells, Factions and Suicide Operatives: The Fragmentation of Militant Islamism in the Philippines Post-Marawi,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 41, No. 1, April 2019.

² Influential ASG subcommanders in the past had been MNLF subcommanders. These include Radullan Sahiron, Ghalib Andang and Ghumbahali Hundali in Sulu; as well as Isnilon Hapilon and Furuji Indama in Basilan. Hence, in its early days the Philippines authorities and the MNLF described the ASG as rogue MNLF members or as its “lost commands.”

³ International Crisis Group, “The Philippines: Counter-Insurgency vs Counter-Terrorism in Mindanao”, Asia Report No. 152, 14 May 2008, p.7.

⁴ Libya under Muammar Gaddafi had been providing military training for various rebel organisations around the world, and the MNLF was one of them. Some of the ASG’s top leaders had also received training in Libya when they were still MNLF members, including the group’s founder, Abdurajak Janjalani. Later on, the MNLF-Philippine peace deal was mediated by Libya, hence the name Tripoli 1976 Peace Agreement. Libya was also involved in the Philippine-MILF peace process as part of the International Monitoring Team.

⁵ “Philippine hostages head for Libya,” www.bbc.co.uk, 28 August 2000.

⁶ Linda Robinson, Patrick B. Johnson and Gillian S. Oak, “U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014,” RAND Corporation 2016, p.11.

⁷ Ramzi Yousef and his uncle, the 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, were in Manila when they plotted the so-called Bojinka attacks, which included the assassination of Pope John Paul II and hijacking commercial planes and crashing them onto various targets in the US. The Bojinka plot did not materialise, but it became the groundwork for the 9 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

including providing equipment, intelligence and technical assistance. The American hostages were still in ASG custody on 11 September 2001 when Al-Qaeda attacked New York and Washington. In early 2002, the U.S. Armed Forces launched “Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines”, focused primarily on ridding Basilan of the ASG and involving the deployment of 1,200 U.S. soldiers across Mindanao.⁸ U.S. forces also focused on infrastructure projects, and one of their early commitments was to build a ring road around Basilan that would improve delivery of goods and services and “increase the mobility of AFP and the U.S. forces to conduct military operations.”⁹

In 2006, both forces launched Oplan Ultimatum, an operation that was focused on decapitation strikes against the ASG. Several senior ASG leaders were killed in this operation, including Khadafi Janjalani in 2006 and Abu Solaiman in 2007. The result was that by the end of 2007, attacks by the ASG, in both Basilan and Sulu provinces, dropped by more than 50 per cent from their 2001 levels, leading to a false sense of optimism that the ASG was a diminished threat, even as kidnapping incidents continued.¹⁰

By 2014, the U.S. operation was declared a resounding success, based on a decline in “enemy-initiated attacks; reduction in the number of ASG members; poll data showing decreased local support for the ASG and increased public satisfaction with government security forces.”¹¹ The U.S. reported that the number of ASG fighters was reduced from 1,270 at the start of the war on terror campaign in 2001 to 400 members in 2014. The same report also noted that the AFP’s precision-strike capability had improved after the U.S. provided drones and ‘smart bombs’, first used in Sulu in 2012.¹² In February 2015, U.S. Special Forces departed with a sense of mission accomplished, leaving behind several dozen “advisers”.¹³

In retrospect, it was clear that the use of ‘enemy-initiated attacks’ as an indicator was misleading. In fact, the U.S. presence had been more like pressure on a water balloon, and when military operations became too intense in one area, top ASG commanders would just move to another region. The U.S. evaluation did warn that the decline could be temporary and only “residents” permanent and active rejection of sanctuary, support and resources will insure against a return or resurgence of the threat in these areas.”¹⁴ The warning proved all too true.

Despite the loss of key leaders and lacking a strong central command, ASG were able to build on family and clan ties, income from extortion and the occasional kidnapping, and protection from a few local politicians to recover and rebuild. There was also a new ideological

⁸ RAND, op. cit., p.25.

⁹ Ibid., p.29. The Basilan Circumferential Road was finally finished in 2016 and inaugurated by President Aquino.

¹⁰ RAND, op. cit., p. 60. For a list of incidents between January and April 2009, including the kidnapping of three ICRC workers, see “Timeline: Kidnapping of ICRC Hostages by the Abu Sayyaf Group,” www.abs-cbn.com, 31 March 2009.

¹¹ TNS Qualitative, “Insights into Filipinos in Mindanao: Qualitative Research Findings for Project Achilles Wave 8,” September 2014.

¹² RAND op. cit., p. 87.

¹³ “U.S. Officially Ends Special Operations Task Force in the Philippines, Some Advisors May Remain,” www.usni.org, 27 February 2015.

¹⁴ RAND, op. cit., pp. 115-116.

commitment evident among some top commanders, the result of indoctrination by a handful of Indonesian and Malaysian fighters who had joined them.¹⁵

III. THE RISE OF ISIS AND THE SIEGE OF MARAWI

When Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi declared a new caliphate called Islamic State in 2014, the ASG commander in Basilan, Isnion Hapilon, was one of the first to pledge his loyalty and was soon acknowledged as amir of the alliance of pro-ISIS groups in the Philippines, later to call themselves “East Asia Wilayah”. Its emergence led to a rise in violence across Mindanao, Basilan and Sulu and to splits in the ASG between pro- and anti-ISIS factions.¹⁶ Radullan Sahiron, the ASG commander, who had taken over nominal leadership of the group after the killing of Khadafi Janjalani in 2006, had no interest in ISIS or the global jihad, but several of his subcommanders did, notably Hajan Sawadjaan from Patikul, Jolo.¹⁷ In response to the occupation of Marawi City by the pro-ISIS coalition in May 2017, the AFP laid siege to the city and President Duterte declared martial law throughout Mindanao. In the end, all senior pro-ISIS leaders were killed, including Hapilon. No one knows how many of the roughly 900 killed were ASG members, but Hapilon had brought many of his followers from Basilan with him.

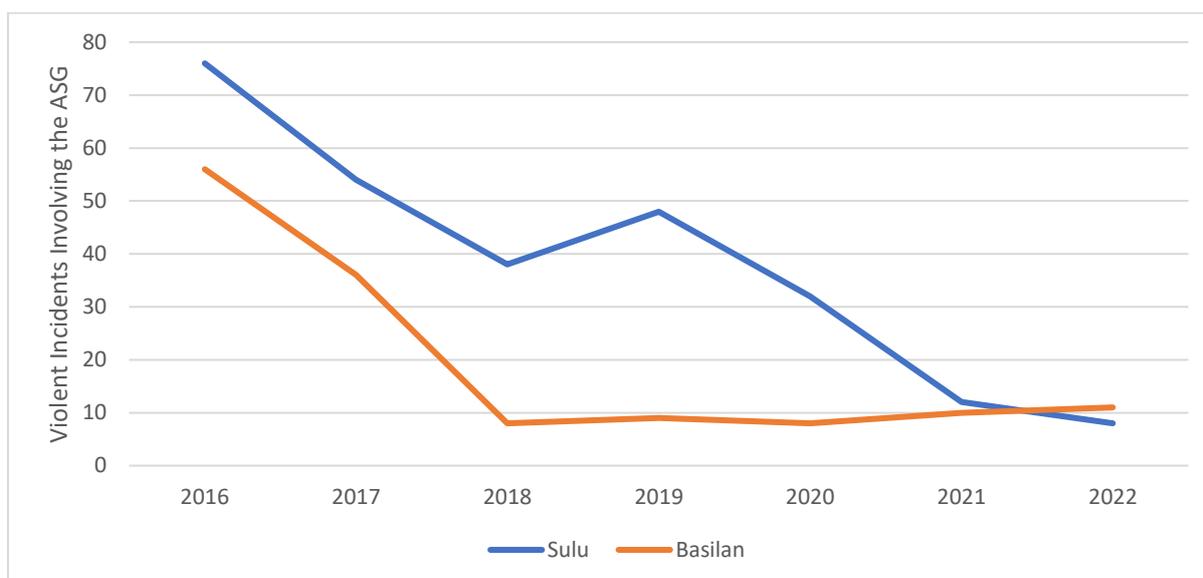
The end of the Marawi siege in October 2017 was followed by a slow decline in ISIS support throughout Southeast Asia, coinciding with a global decline caused by ISIS defeats in the Middle East. By December 2017, the ISIS “caliphate” had lost control of 95 per cent of its territory, including its strongholds in Mosul and Raqqa.

After Marawi, divergent trajectories of violence in Basilan and Sulu created different opportunities and challenges for the Philippines government. ASG-related violence dropped dramatically in Basilan (Figure 1). From 36 incidents in 2017, Basilan experienced eight incidents in 2018, one of which was the Lamitan bombing in July 2018. The reduction in violence created space for initial surrender and reintegration programs in Basilan. In Sulu, however, an influx of fighters after Marawi led to a surge in clashes, a series of suicide bombings in 2019 and 2020, and intensive military operations thereafter. Violence declined again in both provinces after Covid struck.

¹⁵ See IPAC, “Pro-ISIS Group in Mindanao and their links to Indonesia and Malaysia,” Report No.33, 21 October 2016.

¹⁶ See IPAC, “Marawi, the ‘East Asia Wilayah’ and Indonesia,” Report No. 38, 21 July 2017; and IPAC, “Protecting the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas from Abu Sayyaf Attacks,” Report No. 53, 9 January 2019.

¹⁷ It was the Sawadjaan faction that kidnapped a group of foreigners on the resort island of Samal in 2015 and executed the hostages when ransom money was not forthcoming.

Figure 1: The decline of ASG-related violence in Basilan and Sulu

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Incidents include those that involve ASG members in battles, explosions, and violence against civilians in Sulu and Basilan Provinces.

IV. SURRENDER AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS IN BASILAN

The death in Marawi of Isnilon Hapilon and most of his hardcore ASG fighters, including a few foreigners, was one cause of the drop in violence in Basilan. Another was improved governance in Basilan under Governor Jim Hataman-Saliman (elected in 2016) that lessened the incentive for local officials to work out protection deals with Abu Sayyaf fighters.¹⁸ Another may have been the program that the governor developed with the AFP for the surrender and reintegration of ASG members. Hataman, had become interested in a program that the local army unit, the 101st Infantry Brigade, introduced in 2017 that offered wanted ASG members a chance to surrender, receive financial assistance, and return to their communities in exchange for turning in their guns. Dozens of suspected ASG members began to surrender thereafter, starting with 89 men, mostly from al-Barka municipality, where 14 Philippine Marines had been killed in an ambush in 2007.¹⁹ Most were subsequently employed as military informants or became part of the Citizen Armed Force Geographical Unit (CAFGU), a civilian militia.²⁰ The ASG reintegration program in Basilan became one of many initiatives started during the Duterte administration to make peace with different groups of insurgents across the country.

¹⁸ Alex Douglas, "Island of Stability? The Causes and Uncertain Future of Basilan's Recent Stabilisation," unpublished paper, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2018.

¹⁹ For a full account of the Al-Barka massacre, see International Crisis Group, "The Philippines: Counter-insurgency vs Counter-terrorism in Mindanao, op.cit, pp.17-18. For an evaluation of the first batch of surrenderers in Basilan province see Frede Moreno, Marcelina Carpizo, Ludivina Dekit and Abdullbaqui Berik, "Building Resilience and Promoting Peaceful Engagement: Case Study Research on Reintegration of Returnees from Violent Extremist Groups," Western Mindanao State University, 26 May 2020.

²⁰ CAFGU, a poorly paid and poorly supervised militia has a long history of abuse going back to the late 1980s. See J. D. Ross, "Militia Abuses in the Philippines," *Third World Legal Studies*, Vol 9, Article 7, 1990.

A. E-CLIP and PAVE

On 3 April 2018, President Duterte issued Administrative Order No. 10, which was designed to centralise all government programs for the reintegration of former members of the Communist Party of the Philippines, the New People’s Army and the National Democratic Front and their immediate family members. It was officially known as the Enhancement of Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP).²¹ Two weeks later, ARMM Governor Mujiv Hataman, Jim Hataman’s brother, launched the Program Against Violent Extremism (PAVE) that he said was based on Duterte’s concept of talking to all.²²

The PAVE program was built on Jim Hataman’s concept of local government cooperating with the military and was announced at the headquarters of the army’s 4th Special Forces Battalion in Isabela City, Basilan. International donors provided funding for services that included counselling, vocational training, and food assistance for each ASG returnee and his family.²³ In many cases, housing was also provided for the surrenderees and their families through the ARMM-BRIDGE program, a poverty alleviation program for vulnerable communities funded by the U.S., Japan and the World Bank, among others.²⁴ The initial intake for PAVE was 139 former fighters.

PAVE was successful in attracting some high-profile surrenders, even though on paper, it was only open to ASG members who did not have a pending arrest warrant out against them. In May 2018, a well-known ASG subcommander, Nur Hassan Jamiri, and thirteen of his followers surrendered and enrolled in the reintegration program. Nur Hassan Jamiri had a long list of outstanding warrants for his decades of involvement in kidnappings and murders, including beheadings of soldiers. Nonetheless, the military lobbied the local courts to waive the charges against prominent ASG figures as an incentive for their safe return and cooperation.²⁵ This exemption created tensions with law enforcement agencies that were still determined to bring criminal suspects to justice – justice, in their view, including targeted killings.²⁶ For instance, in August 2019, the police Special Action Forces and the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) killed two ASG members who were PAVE beneficiaries and an MNLF leader without coordinating with the local military command.²⁷ The two agencies were

²¹ The E-CLIP program was a reaction to Duterte’s frustration with the negotiation process with the Communist leaders living abroad, primarily Jose Maria Sison. The new program bypassed the need to deal with Communist diaspora leaders while offering amnesty and monetary incentives to field commanders and their rank-and-file. For the full text of Administrative Order No.10, see

<https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2018/04apr/20180403-AO-10-RRD.pdf>.

²² Teofilo Garcia, JR, “ARMM launches program vs. violent extremism,” Philippine News Agency, 17 April 2018,

²³ IPAC interview with Balay Mindanaw Basilan, Zamboanga city, 27 August 2022.

²⁴ “ARMM pours P600M for infra, livelihood projects in Basilan’s former battleground,” www.inquirer.net, 13 January 2015.

²⁵ “Lorenzana hopes surrender of top terror leader leads to Abu Sayyaf downfall,” CNN Philippines, 29 March 2018.

²⁶ A local NGO officer stated that five ASG surrenderees who already enrolled in the PAVE program were arrested by the police because they went out of the military cantonment. The military had to lobby the police to waive the charges and return them back to their camp. IPAC interview with an NGO worker from Basilan, Zamboanga city, 27 August 2022.

²⁷ “PNP says nothing irregular in ‘uncoordinated’ raid in Basilan,” www.inquirer.net, 6 August 2019.

criticised by the military and Basilan government for undermining the local effort to counter violent extremism through peaceful means.

There were also other challenges. Barely three months after PAVE was launched in Basilan, a truck laden with bombs exploded on the outskirts of Lamitan city on 31 July 2018.²⁸ Six security personnel and four bystanders were killed. The driver of the truck was a Moroccan-German known as Kathir al-Maghribi, who died on the spot.²⁹ It was later discovered that this bombing was the product of collaboration between two ASG factions, the Furuji Indama group in Basilan and the Sawadjaan group in Sulu.

Nevertheless, Basilan's relative peace held, even in regions that used to be ASG hotbeds.³⁰

B. PAVE and the establishment of BARMM

More than 200 ASG returnees surrendered in the first two years of PAVE and moved to new houses provided by the ARMM administration.³¹ After ARMM's transition to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2019, however, the sustainability of PAVE in Basilan came into question. As Mujiv Hataman's tenure as regional governor ended, so did American funding for ASG surrenderers in Basilan.³² The latter did not receive housing after 2019.³³ A 2020 assessment report predicted that the livelihood assistance and life skill training programs would not last for more than one year because of uncertainty over government funding during the transitional period.³⁴ Without the programs, keeping the ASG returnees living a normal life in mainstream society would not be sustainable.

The new interim BARMM administration led by the MILF faced daunting challenges to ensure all the people in the Bangsamoro provinces felt a peace dividend while preparing for the scheduled election of the first BARMM parliament in 2022, later postponed until 2025.³⁵ At the same time, the MILF made a commitment to decommission and disarm 30 per cent of its forces, or 12,000 combatants, by the end of 2019.³⁶ These decommissioned combatants who were spread across Bangsamoro provinces expected PHP1 million (USD\$18,000) worth of government aid and housing, including an immediate PHP100,000 (USD\$1800) cash reward.³⁷ With these much more urgent problems to tackle, ensuring the continuation of ASG reintegration programs was not a top priority. All the assistance programs provided by the

²⁸ For details on the Lamitan bombing, see IPAC, *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, Report No. 54, 5 March 2019.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ According to ACLED Dataset, Basilan's municipalities with the highest number of ASG-related incidents between 2016 and 2022 were Tipo-Tipo (29 incidents), Sumisip (27), Lamitan (23), Al-Barka (20) and Ungakaya Pukan (8). Tipo-Tipo municipality experienced major armed clashes throughout 2016 but no violent incidents involving the ASG in 2018.

³¹ Frede Moreno et al., *op. cit.*

³² Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Strategic Review of Australia's Support for Peacebuilding in Conflict-Affected Mindanao: Review Mission Findings," 22 May 2020, p. 14.

³³ IPAC interview with an NGO worker from Basilan, Zamboanga city, 28 August 2022.

³⁴ Frede Moreno et al., *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³⁵ "Duterte resets BARMM elections to 2025," Philippine News Agency, 29 October 2021.

³⁶ "12,000 former MILF troops to be decommissioned in 2019," www.rappler.com, 18 June 2019.

³⁷ Ibid. Philippine peso (PHP) conversion to the U.S. dollar (USD\$) is based on the 23 December 2022 exchange rate.

regional government for the ex-ASGs were thus suspended due to lack of funding from BARMM.

Despite lack of interest from BARMM, however, the Basilan provincial government managed to extend PAVE's lifeline with support from the central government, new international donors, and NGO partners.³⁸ In 2019 the program was renamed Advancing and Sustaining Good Governance and Community Actions towards Resiliency and Empowerment (AS2G-CARE), and a local NGO, Balay Mindanaw, was tasked with continuing the reintegration efforts. At the same time, the 2019 election resulted in more Hataman clan members elected as officials, and they continued to promote the AS2G-CARE as Basilan's flagship program.³⁹ Mujiv Hataman, whose term as ARMM governor ended in 2019, won a Congress seat in representing Basilan's lone district and became the House Deputy Speaker. He continued to promote humanitarian work and countering violent extremism through peaceful means.⁴⁰

A new donor, the Australian government, pledged AUD\$759,588 (USD\$516,443) to fund AS2G-CARE program for three years (2019-2022).⁴¹ The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), a Philippine government agency, also assisted ASG reintegration by providing alternative education for young returnees and vocational courses for those who wanted to start small businesses.⁴²

The reintegration programs in Basilan, first under PAVE and then AS2G-Care, appear to have helped prevent a resurgence of ASG violence, though it is always difficult to demonstrate direct causal links. There is no reason, however, to believe that the ASG has disappeared for good.

³⁸ There are other new programs that focus on countering violent extremism in Basilan province. Project CIRCLE (Communities of Inclusion and Resilience through Collaborative Local Engagements) is funded by the Asia Foundation and Australia. The project was started in 2019, focusing on the general issues related to countering and preventing violent extremism in Basilan. Norway and Japan embassies also supported UNDP's CVE programs in Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi provinces. See "Norway, UNDP and BARMM government signed partnership agreement to help peace building in Bangsamoro region," www.sandasia.com, 16 November 2020; and "IDPs Receive Agricultural Livelihood Implements From UNDP, Japan Embassy," www.kalinawnews.com, 4 December 2021.

³⁹ In total, seven Hatamans were elected to office in the 2019 election, namely: Hadjiman 'Jim' Hataman (Basilan governor), Mujiv Hataman (Congressman), Sitti Djalia Turabin-Hataman (Mujiv's wife, Isabela City mayor), Jhul Kifli Saliman (the son of Jim Hataman, Isabela City vice mayor), Jul-Adnan Hataman (Sumisip mayor), and Gulam 'Boy' Hataman (Sumisip vice mayor). A municipal councillor for Sumisip is related to the Hataman clan as well. See International Conflict Alert Philippines, "Conflict Alert 2020: Enduring Wars," 2020, p.14.

⁴⁰ AS2G-CARE is a collaborative program between the Basilan provincial government, NGO Balay Mindanaw; AFP's Joint Task Force Basilan; Nagdilaab Foundation; Office of Deputy Speaker Mujiv Hataman; the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity (OPAPRU), with the funding support from the Australian government.

⁴¹ The AS2G-CARE program is part of a larger Australian government investment called Peacebuilding in Conflict-Affected Mindanao with a total allocation of approximately AUD\$91.2 million (USD\$62,218,395), which started from 2014 to 2023. See Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁴² Sixty ASG returnees enrolled in the Alternative Learning System between 2018 and 2019. Some of the returnees also received training on food processing, bakery, and livestock training on chicken production. Some of the products are advertised at the government website www.ntfelcac.org/products

C. Ongoing Challenges

Basilan's surrender and reintegration efforts still face challenges. The first issue is that despite five years of implementation, reintegration programs in Basilan still lack a legal framework that would guarantee amnesty for ex-ASG members enrolled in PAVE or AS2G-Care, especially those with outstanding charges.⁴³ It means that many face a long wait in military camps, causing frustration. A case in point occurred on 13 October 2022 in Sumisip, Basilan, where an ex-ASG member, frustrated over the long wait for reintegration benefits that were due to him, ran amok inside the camp, killing one soldier and two civilians.⁴⁴

A second challenge is that the reintegration benefits offered by these programs are not attractive to many ASG combatants, especially those driven by vengeance and religious indoctrination, who are still fighting against the government. Low-level ASG violence (less than ten incidents per year) continued after the PAVE program was initiated in 2018, and as of late 2022, there was a worrying sign of escalation, especially around Sumisip.⁴⁵

A third challenge is that the lack of coordination between the military and the MILF runs the risk of returning to the pattern of unintended clashes that undermined previous efforts to eliminate the ASG threat through joint operations with the U.S. This risk materialised in early November 2022 in the municipality of Ungkaya Pukan, where suspected ASG members responsible for a string of bombings were spotted hiding in the area where many MILF families resided. The police put their numbers at less than 20.⁴⁶ On 8 November 2022, an army unit was deployed to the area to pursue ASG members responsible for the Isabela City bombing but they encountered resistance from MILF forces residing in the area. Three days of shootouts ensued, leaving four soldiers and seven MILF fighters dead. Some 4,000 residents were displaced.⁴⁷

⁴³ In 2019, Mujiv Hataman tried to resolve this issue by submitting a bill to Congress that would institutionalise PAVE as part of the national Program on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE), the same way E-CLIP is implemented for communist insurgents. This would provide a legal basis for the national government to recognise ASG surrenderees as participants of a local peace program and guarantee their safety. However, the bill's discussion is still pending before the House Committee on Public Order and Safety.

⁴⁴ "Man runs amok in Basilan, kills soldier, 2 others," www.rappler.com, 13 October 2022.

⁴⁵ After Furuji Indama was killed in Basilan in August 2020, a subcommander, Radzmil Jannatul, took over his group, which continued its sporadic attacks against the government. A series of clashes between the ASG and security forces was reported between late 2021 and early 2022 in Sumisip, where Jim Hataman's son served as mayor. The use of homemade bombs (improvised explosive devices, IEDs) by the ASG also increased. Between 2021 and 2022, Jannatul's faction remotely detonated five IEDs, in which one person was killed. After Radzmil was killed in a clash with the AFP in March 2022, twin explosions occurred in Isabela city in May 2022, and two people were injured. The group is now led by Pasil Bayali. See "Woman trips on wire, triggers blast that kills her in Basilan," www.inquirer.net, 11 January 2022, and "2 explosions rock Basilan's Isabela City," www.mindanews.com, 31 May 2022.

⁴⁶ Information provided by the PNP to IPAC, 18 August 2022.

⁴⁷ According to the 101st Infantry Brigade commander, Brig. Gen. Domingo Gobway, an MILF commander named Hiram had already informed the military about their upcoming visit to Barangay Ulitán, Ungkaya Pukan. The military gave the permission to visit provided that Hiram and his followers were unarmed. However, on 8 November 2022, Hiram arrived with 30 armed followers, and a firefight broke out after one of the men shot a soldier with a sniper rifle. "Soldier hurt as firefight erupts in Basilan village," *Philippine News Agency*, 8 November 2022.

The November 2022 clash was the most serious involving the ASG since surrender and reintegration efforts started in 2017. A cease-fire mechanism was quickly enacted between the AFP and MILF.⁴⁸ The MILF 114th Base Commander Dan Laksaw Asnawie, who is now a member of the BARMM parliament, was sent to Ungkaya Pukan to defuse the conflict and distribute financial assistance to the families of MILF members who were killed in the incident.⁴⁹ The MILF also agreed to form a joint unit with the AFP and Philippine police to address the ‘lawless elements’ in Ungkaya Pukan.⁵⁰

Finally, there are questions surrounding the sustainability of the donor-funded reintegration programs in Basilan. The Australian-funded AS2G-CARE program, which as of late 2022 was supporting 365 surrenderees, is scheduled to end in 2023.⁵¹ One big challenge for the local government will be to prevent ex-fighters from turning back to criminality or being employed as gun-for-hire by powerful politicians once the assistance runs out. The risk of recidivism among ASG fighters is highlighted by the case of a high profile surrenderee and former PAVE beneficiary, Nur Hassan Jamiri, who was reportedly hired as ‘muscle’ for a local politician.⁵² On election day in May 2022, Jamiri, who surrendered in 2018,⁵³ led a group of heavily armed men, forced voters in Tipo-Tipo to go home and stole two ballot boxes. Some of the men were spotted inking ballots for the candidate they supported. They went on to another village and were only dispersed after some soldiers fired warning shots.⁵⁴

V. A NEW SECURITY APPROACH IN SULU

The decline of violence in Sulu started much later than in Basilan. Sources attributed the decline to several factors: the death of Hatib Hajan Sawdjaan in July 2020, an increased military presence combined with better treatment of civilians; the return of absentee local officials during the Covid lockdown and additional checkpoints established during martial law and kept in place during the lockdown. Improved political dynamics between the MNLF and the ASG, and among MNLF factions may also have played a role. As in Basilan, “peace” in Sulu came to be measured by the decline in violent incidents, the number of displaced who

⁴⁸ There are two agreements between the Philippine government and the MILF that serve as guidelines to conduct counterterrorism operations in the MILF territory and to cease hostilities when the two forces accidentally clash. The Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) is the mechanism designed to facilitate coordination between government security actors and the MILF to share intelligence on terrorists and avoid accidental clashes when security forces pursue them. The cease-fire mechanism is coordinated under the Coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH).

⁴⁹ “Stakeholders vow to keep peace in Basilan,” *The Manila Times*, 17 November 2022.

⁵⁰ MP Dan Laksaw Asnawie official Facebook page post, 13 November 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/Office-of-MP-Hji-Dan-S-Asnawie-108328698693869>

⁵¹ Australian DFAT is currently in talks with local NGOs about a possible 5-year extension. The next program is likely to be tailored for ex-ASG members and returnees who already return to mainstream society and the empowerment of communities around them. For the next phase of implementation, both NGOs and donors expect that the government will take the responsibility to fund and carry out the programs for the new batches of ASG surrenderers. IPAC interview with Balay Mindanaw Basilan, Zamboanga City, 27 August 2022.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Jamiri was enrolled in the PAVE program in 2018 but did not participate in the subsequent AS2G-CARE that started in 2019. IPAC interview with ASG2-CARE source person via Telegram, 14 December 2022.

⁵⁴ “400 ballots wasted following ex-Sanyaf leader’s harassment in Basilan,” *www.mindanews.com*, 10 May 2022.

returned home, and the number of ASG surrenderees. Unlike Basilan, however, the Sulu provincial government only played a passive role in the process.

A. Task Force Sulu and the 11th Infantry Division

Until December 2018, when the 11th Infantry Division of the Philippine army was created, the fight against the ASG had been led by Joint Task Force-Sulu, a combined military force based in Sulu as part of the Western Mindanao Command (Westmincom).⁵⁵ President Duterte's announcement of the new division for the Sulu archipelago, to be based in Jolo and covering the provinces of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, appears to have been triggered by a few high-profile ASG incidents, including the July 2018 truck bombing in Lamitan, Basilan, and a November 2018 clash in Patikul, Sulu in which five soldiers died.⁵⁶ Reports that dozens of Marawi survivors, including a few foreigners, fled to Jolo and were given refuge by Hajan Sawadjaan, may also have been a factor.

The division's creation did not mean massive new deployments, at least initially. Most of the personnel were reassigned from other units already in Sulu. But gradually troop strength increased, with the creation of new brigades and an intense recruitment campaign, including over Facebook.⁵⁷ The military made a particularly concerted effort to recruit local Tausug, the main ethnic group in Sulu, as soldiers, reservists and members of CAFGU, the civilian militia that serves as an army auxiliary and that has had an unenviable reputation for abuse.⁵⁸ The initial cost of the new division was said to be PHP929 million [USD\$16.7 million], a price tag that steadily increased with recruitment, training, deployment and construction expenses, not counting associated humanitarian and reintegration costs.⁵⁹

In the past, military operations in Mindanao and Sulu against suspected rebels led to a pattern of human rights abuses, civilian displacement, and local resentment that helped fuel the insurgencies. Indeed, the narrative of military brutality was a critical element in ISIS propaganda in the Philippines after 2014.⁶⁰ The creation of a new division was thus cause for concern, especially given Duterte's own record of endorsing extrajudicial executions and his orders to the military to "pulverise" the ASG after the January 2019 Jolo cathedral bombing.⁶¹

The military continued to use the problematic practices of bounty payments to killers of leading suspects, airstrikes leading to displacement, and body counts of ASG members as a

⁵⁵ Regional task forces had been set up under the Western Mindanao Command in 2017 as part of the AFP's Development Support and Security Plan "Kapayapaan" 2017-2022.

<https://westmincom.afp.mil.ph/index.php/about-us/his?showall=1>

⁵⁶ "Duterte sends military division to Jolo after 5 soldiers die in clash," *Manila Bulletin*, 28 November 2018.

⁵⁷ See the many different appeals to join the army on the Joint Task Force-Sulu Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/jtfsulu/>

⁵⁸ "Military buildup vs Abu Sayyaf in Sulu continues," *Philippines Star*, 24 December 2021. In January, the first ever "Sulu Ready Reserve Battalion" composed entirely of Tausug from Patikul became operational with 195 members. They received 45 days of Basic Citizen Military Training.

⁵⁹ "DND plans to spend P1b to deploy 4, 500 men in Sulu," *Manila Standard*, 5 Sept 2021

⁶⁰ IPAC, "Post-Marawi lessons from Philippines Detainees," Report No. 41, 27 November 2017.

⁶¹ Duterte had initially ordered the military to crush the ASG by June 2017, but the Marawi siege led to the deadline being pushed back. See "Military pushes back deadline vs Abu Sayyaf," *Philippines Star*, 21 November 2017.

metric of success. But its increased presence in conflict-wracked areas and a change in strategy in 2017 that led to a focus on non-combat initiatives appears to have made a difference in how it was perceived by the local population. According to one study of Basilan returnees, not only did civilians feel safer, but ASG members who wanted to surrender also believed that the increased troop presence would help protect them and their families from retaliatory attacks by ASG members who felt betrayed.⁶²

B. Decline in violence

Violence also declined in Sulu, and the security situation improved to the point that by mid-2022, Sulu governor Sakur Tan declared the province open for tourism.⁶³ Patikul, home to the Sawadjaan clan and nominal ASG leader Radullon Sahiron, remained a hotspot, and clashes were also frequent in and around Indanan.

Sulu however, had been marked by a series of suicide bombings in 2019 and 2020 by both foreigners (Indonesians and Egyptians) and local women and men. These attacks led to concerns that suicide bombings had become a standard part of the ASG repertoire and that more could be in the works. The Jolo cathedral bombing in January 2019, involving an Indonesian couple, killed 23, not counting the bombers.⁶⁴ An attack in Indanan by two local ASG men the following June killed nine. An Egyptian woman killed herself in September 2019 in an attempt to bomb a police post, also in Indanan.⁶⁵ Her husband and son were killed by the military before they could carry out another bombing in Jolo. All three had been in the Sawadjaan camp. Finally, in August 2020, two local women, one the widow of one of the bombers killed in June 2019 in Indanan, carried out an attack in Jolo city, killing 15. As of late 2022, no further suicide bombings had taken place, but a radicalised Indonesian, the teenage son of the cathedral bombers, was known to be fighting with one of the Sawadjaan commanders. His sisters, the young widows of ASG fighters, were in the custody of Philippine police.⁶⁶

ASG kidnappings for ransom declined after a spurt in 2018. Two attempts in April and August 2018 ended in failure, thanks to improved security measures taken by slow-moving vessels like tugboats and fishing boats that had been targeted in the past.⁶⁷ In September, October

⁶² Frede Moreno, Marcelina Carpizo, Ludivina Dekit and Abdullbaqui Berik, “Building Resilience and Promoting Peaceful Engagement: Case Study Research on Reintegration of Returnees from Violent Extremist Groups,” Western Mindanao State University report for the UNDP, submitted on 26 May 2020.

⁶³ “Sulu ramps up tourism efforts,” www.manilatimes.net, 12 August 2022.

⁶⁴ The Indonesian couple, Rullie Rian Zeka and his wife, Ulfa Handayani, were linked to Indonesia’s largest pro-ISIS coalition, Jamaah Anshorul Daulah (JAD) and were part of an extended family network of violent extremists that was also responsible for the bombing of the cathedral in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia on 28 March 2021. See IPAC, “The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines,” op. cit.

⁶⁵ “DNA tests on Sulu suicide bombers confirm Abu Sayyaf’s ISIS links – military,” www.rappler.com, 14 November 2019.

⁶⁶ Rezky Fantasya alias Cici was arrested in October 2020, her younger sister Aisyah in early 2021.

⁶⁷ Indonesian tugboat crew was able to prevent the kidnappers from boarding by shooting them back with flare guns. A new multilateral security mechanism was also in place. The Trilateral Maritime Joint Patrol between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines started in 2016 had set up a sea lane corridor in the Sulu-Sulawesi seas, which is to be used as a safe passage for slow-moving vessels.

and December, a rash of abductions took place, netting seven Indonesian fishermen, the Malaysian captain of one of their fishing boats, and a British-Filipina couple.⁶⁸

These kidnappings were not as profitable as they had been earlier. While ASG hostages in 2016-17 had mostly been crew members of merchant ships employed by shipping corporations, the new hostages were mostly poor Indonesian fishermen working out of Sabah, Malaysia for Chinese-Malaysian boat owners. Thus, not only were the ransom demands significantly lower, but the Indonesian government was also under less pressure from companies to move quickly to secure the victims' release. The last successful kidnapping of foreigners took place in January 2020 when a group led by an ASG subcommander known as Apo Mike kidnapped five Indonesian fishermen. By the end of 2020, out of fifteen international hostages abducted since 2018, only two were successfully ransomed.⁶⁹ The others were killed, managed to escape or were rescued, sometimes with the help of an MNLF "Anti-Kidnapping Taskforce" led by the late Yusop Jikiri.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, the death toll of leading ASG commanders and subcommanders rose as Duterte's military campaign against the ASG intensified. Hajan Sawadjaan was killed in July 2020, though his body was never recovered. On 3 November 2020, a Philippine maritime patrol spotted a boat with armed passengers at night near Sulare Island, off the coast of Jolo, and rammed it, killing all seven passengers. Two of Hajan's nephews, Mannul and Madsmar Sawadjaan, were killed. Two ASG subcommanders, Bensio Baharama and Hatib Munap Binda were killed by the Philippine marines in Panamao, Jolo.⁷¹ They had been involved in the kidnapping of two Indonesians in September 2018. Their sons, Sansibar Bensio and Mabar Binda, slipped out of Sulu and hid in Beaufort, Sabah, until Malaysian authorities arrested them in May 2021, together with six others.⁷² Apo Mike was killed in March 2021 in an operation to rescue the Indonesian hostages abducted a year earlier. As of 2022, no one knew whether Radullan Sahiron was dead or alive. Idang Susukan, arrested in August 2020 at Nur Misuari's house in Davao, was shot and killed in October 2022 in what appears to have been a suicidal escape attempt from Camp Crame, the high-security police detention centre in Manila. A top Sawadjaan leader who remained at large was Mudzrimar "Mundi" Sawadjaan, said to have taken over the leadership of his uncle Hajan's faction after the latter's death. Every time a top leader was killed, dozens of his followers would surrender to the military.

Martial law and Covid-19 regulations also helped improve security in Sulu, according to sources interviewed for this report.⁷³ They said Covid-regulations helped improve overall governance by forcing mayors and local officials who lived outside of the province to return home and to be present at their offices to deliver emergency aid and provisions to the people. An NGO worker from Sulu noted that many mayors in the island provinces lived in Zamboanga or other big cities where life was more comfortable. He said, "Covid-19 actually introduced

⁶⁸ IPAC, "Protecting the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas from Abu Sayyaf Attacks," op. cit.

⁶⁹ A Dutch hostage, kidnapped in 2014, was shot and killed trying to escape in May 2019. Three other hostages died during rescue operations.

⁷⁰ "Westmincom welcomes MNLF help to find abducted physician," www.pna.gov.ph, 27 February 2020.

⁷¹ "2 alleged Abu Sayyaf sub-leaders killed in Sulu encounter," CNN Philippines, 20 November 2020.

⁷² "Malaysia arrests Abu Sayyaf militants with Philippine help," www.apnews.com, 10 May 2021.

⁷³ IPAC interview with members of the Non-Violent Peace Force Philippines, Cotabato City, 24 August 2022.

us to good governance and public service, which we had never experienced in our hometown.” He also noted that the mobility restrictions stemming from both martial law and Covid meant that it was much more difficult for armed groups to congregate or mobilise, and fewer gun-related incidents took place.⁷⁴

C. Surrender and reintegration programs

A bewildering array of programs to encourage surrender and reintegration in Sulu emerged at all levels of government with occasionally overlapping mandates. It was not always clear whether they were a cause or a result of the decline in violence, how well they were being monitored, or how financially sustainable they were. All required the surrenderee to turn in a gun in exchange for a cash payment or assistance package, which varied widely in size. In some cases, fighters who wanted to surrender had to borrow money to buy a gun so their surrender would be accepted.⁷⁵ Eligibility requirements also varied: some required the fighter to be on a military “persons of status” list; others appeared to be open to anyone with a gun.

By the end of 2019, the 11th ID reported that 189 ASG members and supporters in Sulu had surrendered, or twice the number from the previous year. As in Basilan, they were not handed over to the police to be prosecuted but sent to designated military cantonments. At that time, there was no reintegration program available in Sulu other than the one-time packages that the military gave to ASG members upon their surrender. But a new program was about to begin.

In December 2018, President Duterte issued Executive Order No.70 (EO70), aimed at Communist rebels. It demonstrated the government’s strategic shift from a highly centralised conflict resolution approach to one that focused on local government, while the military facilitated the surrender and cantonment of rebels who had had enough of fighting and deprivation.⁷⁶ Under EO70, each local government that has to contend with the communist insurgency problems was instructed to form a Task Force - Ending Local Armed Conflict (TF-ELAC) as a coordinating body, with the participation of the military and police.

In December 2019, Westmincom extended EO70 to cover violent extremism in BARMM provinces.⁷⁷ Three months later, in March 2020, Duterte issued Administrative Order 25, which instructed local governments at the provincial and municipal level to form their own PTF-ELAC and MTF-ELAC to implement local reintegration programs for the ASG and other extremist groups.⁷⁸ In Sulu, Gov. Sakur Tan headed the PTF-ELAC. All of these local efforts were to be under the general coordination of the National Task Force (NTF-ELCAC), directly under the president, and Task Force Balik-Loob, a reintegration program chaired by the

⁷⁴ IPAC interview with an NGO worker from Sulu, Zamboanga city, 27 August 2022.

⁷⁵ IPAC interview with an NGO worker from Sulu, Cotabato City, 24 August 2022.

⁷⁶ Many of the surrenderees cited the lack of food and water as a factor in their surrender.

⁷⁷ “WestMincom proposes reforms in combating violent extremism,” www.gmanetwork.com, 21 December 2019.

⁷⁸ AO No. 25 2020 amended Administrative Order No. 10 (2018), which promulgates the creation of an inter-agency task force that supports the government’s program on surrender and reintegration of former rebels. Full text document of Administrative Order No. 25 can be accessed at <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2020/03/18/administrative-order-no-25-s-2020/>

Undersecretary of Defense.⁷⁹ The difference with PAVE was that TF-ELAC was specifically designed to encourage the surrender to the military of high-value targets on a “persons of status register” (PSR), a most wanted list that was once known as “order of battle”. The program became one of the few legal avenues for suspected terrorists to secure amnesty, but it caused additional friction between the military and police, who were hoping to prosecute many of those on the list. It meant that the TF-ELAC surrenderees face restrictions on movement and have to stay within military cantonments to avoid getting killed or arrested.⁸⁰

The inception of PTF-ELAC in Sulu led to peace processes in Patikul and Indanan in August and September 2020 respectively. In both towns, local officials, together with representatives of the military, police and MNLF, signed a “Peace Covenant” promising not to provide sanctuary or shelter to active ASG members.⁸¹

The 11th ID also collaborated with Sulu provincial and Patikul municipal officials to help thousands of displaced residents return home. Most had been forced to flee from 2017 onwards as military operations against the ASG intensified. By November 2020, through a program called Balik Barangay (literally, returning to the village), 1,124 families (5,625 individuals) had returned.⁸²

Balik Barangay success notwithstanding, Patikul was still on edge. ASG members were still lurking in the area, creating a sense of insecurity among returned residents who were afraid of getting caught in a crossfire.⁸³ The military set up a series of checkpoints to protect villages from potential ASG attacks, but this restricted villagers from accessing their farms and bringing their produce to market. Reaching the main towns was even more difficult as basic infrastructure was either badly damaged or non-existent.⁸⁴

Many ASG surrenderees had little access to assistance. The AFP and Sulu PTF-ELAC launched an initiative in October 2020 called Localised Social Integration Program (LSIP) which provided a sack of rice and PHP15,000 (USD\$271) to 144 ASG members, but full-on integration programs were still not operational.⁸⁵ LSIP was to be implemented in three

⁷⁹ Task-Force Balik Loob is chaired by the representative of Department of National Defense. Other government stakeholders involved in the Task Force include: Department of Interior and Local Government, Department of Social Welfare and Development, Office of the President, National Housing Authority, OPAPP, and Office of the Presidential Adviser on Local Extremist Groups concern.

⁸⁰ The military had to lobby the local police in Basilan after the latter arrested five ex-ASG members who sauntered outside of the military camp. IPAC interview with an NGO worker from Basilan, Zamboanga city. 27 August 2022.

⁸¹ “Sulu town declares ASG bandits person non grata,” Philippine News Agency, 30 September 2020.

⁸² “Naka-wui na kami: thousands in Sulu finally return home,” UNHCR Philippines, 27 November 2020. The program was funded by international donors including the Australian government and UNHCR and involved many local organisations including the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos, the Ministry of Social Service and Development, the Rural Health Unit, and the Integrated Resource Development for Tri-People.

⁸³ IPAC interview with an NGO worker from Sulu, Cotabato city, 25 August 2022.

⁸⁴ Non-Violent Peace Force, “Towards a P/CVE Policy Framework for Reintegration in Sulu: A Policy Proposal,” 18 October 2021.

⁸⁵ “271 Sulu ASG Returnees Avail Social Integration Benefits,” AFP 11th ID Official Facebook post, 9 October 2020.

stages, called “return, reform and reintegrate”.⁸⁶ The first referred to the surrendering process, medical check-up and registration, the second to “psychosocial treatment” (not defined), non-formal education and training, and the third to an integration process through which a qualified surrenderee would be granted livelihood assistance and housing.

The LSIP program, however, was only intermittently implemented by various municipal-level task forces in Sulu. An independent evaluation commissioned in 2021 found that many ASG surrenderees did not receive any cash despite the government’s claims.⁸⁷ There was no standard form of livelihood assistance. In some municipalities, the ex-ASG members received two sacks of rice upon surrender, in others, they received fishing equipment or a boat. The promised “psychosocial” support to help surrenderees address grievances was also not forthcoming.⁸⁸

The surrender program in Sulu cast a wide net. Many ASG members above 60 years old had to turn themselves in because they were once involved in a kidnapping operation as far back as early 2000.⁸⁹ Some MNLF members felt they were wrongly tagged as ASG members because they were involved in a clan feud against local politicians.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, the program was successful enough to attract those who did not have a standing warrant of arrest and wanted to have their names cleared from the security sector’s watch list.⁹¹

The BARMM government also began to be involved in surrender and reintegration after it formed the Bangsamoro TF-ELAC in 2020. BARMM earmarked PHP100 million (USD\$1.8 million) of its budget to fund peace-building programs across the BARMM provinces, including one called Project Tugon, which provided humanitarian assistance for former violent extremists. However, given the other regions in Mindanao that it had to serve, Project Tugon only arrived in Sulu in September 2022, when 53 ASG surrenderees received PHP5000 (USD\$90) each, as well as two sacks of rice and grocery items.⁹²

Meanwhile, the 11th ID continued to work with two MNLF factions in Sulu amid the declining ASG threat. In 2021, President Duterte signed amnesty proclamations whereby MNLF members could apply to the “MNLF Transformation Program” to clear their names from certain insurgency-related charges.⁹³ In 2022, the military and the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU, formerly OPAPP) began visiting MNLF camps to disseminate information on the program, which promised MNLF members who

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Non-Violent Peace Force, op. cit.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ “9 Abus in Sulu surrender to Army; 1 tagged in Sipadan abductions,” www.inquirer.net, 12 August 2021.

⁹⁰ Non-violent Peace Force, op. cit.

⁹¹ The Public Attorney’s Office in Sulu offered legal services to ASG surrenderers who did not have any standing arrest warrants and wanted to clear their names. See “4 ASG Surrenders to JTF-Sulu with High-Powered Firearms,” www.11idphilarmy.wordpress.com, 17 February 2022.

⁹² “53 Former ASG members receive BARMM Project Tugon assistance,” kalinawnews.com, 3 September 2022.

⁹³ President Duterte signed amnesty proclamations for three insurgent organisations that had signed peace agreements with the government: The Alex Boncayo Brigade, MNLF and MILF. The charges that can be cleared are those covered under the Revised Penal Code and Special Penal Laws on crimes “in furtherance of their political beliefs.” However, the amnesty states explicitly that it does not cover kidnap for ransom, massacre, rape, terrorism, crimes against humanity, and gross violations of the 1949 Geneva Conventions. See Proclamation No. 1091: <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2021/02/05/proclamation-no-1091-s-2021/>.

agreed to be decommissioned and turn in their guns a one-time payment of PHP45,000 (USD\$813) in cash and employment assistance.⁹⁴ Disagreements over the content and deliverables remained.⁹⁵

On 30 July 2022, Sulu governor Abdusakur Tan announced that a version of the E-CLIP program was to be implemented in his province for ASG members to reintegrate them in local communities. E-CLIP promised cash rewards and livelihood assistance from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG).⁹⁶ The benefits include PHP15,000 (USD\$271) as immediate cash reward upon surrender; PHP50,000 (USD\$900) worth of livelihood assistance after the surrenderee is deemed qualified to enrol in E-CLIP, and firearm remuneration depending on the quality of the weapon turned in.⁹⁷

Only 100 former ASG members (now referred to as Former Violent Extremists, FVE) enrolled in E-CLIP Sulu.⁹⁸ The amount of assistance they received was a third of that promised in the official policy paper. They received only PHP5000 (USD\$90) worth of food assistance instead of a PHP15,000 (USD\$271) cash benefit. They were given the opportunity of summer job employment at a salary of PHP5000 (USD\$90) per month instead of the full reintegration program that in other areas included psychosocial treatment, vocational training, the opportunity for seed investment to start a small business, and a housing unit from the National Housing Authority.⁹⁹ While former communist fighters were allowed to enroll in a non-formal school equivalency program called Alternative Learning System, this program in Sulu was only open to ASG minors.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ The program would include socio-economic, security, confidence-building, and community healing and reconciliation to ensure sustainable peace and reintegration. The OPAPRU has verified 3,000 MNLF members eligible to participate in the program.

⁹⁵ As of late 2022, MNLF leaders were still demanding that the Philippine government form the Special Regional Security Forces (SRSF), an autonomous law enforcement agency that would work under the BARMM government. The SRSF is one of the few remaining commitments from the 1996 MNLF-GPH Final Peace Agreement that is yet to be implemented.

⁹⁶ The first stage is the pre-surfacing phase, where the Joint AFP and PNP Intelligence Committee (JAPIC) facilitate the surrendering process of former violent extremists (FVE). Then JAPIC issues a certificate as the reference for the Local Social Welfare Department Office (LSWDO) and the local government unit to enroll the qualified FVE in the E-CLIP program. The second stage is the surfacing phase, where the FVE beneficiary shall receive livelihood provisions and vocational training from TESDA. After receiving the assistance, the FVE will leave the cantonment and begin the third phase of socioeconomic and capability building. LSWDO and the local government will assist the FVE in seeking employment or provide seed investment if the person wants to start a small business. The fourth phase focuses on sustainability and community building, where the local government agencies will submit the FVE profile to the National Housing Authority as the reference for housing provision, if available.

⁹⁷ Task Force Balik-Loob has a program called “Disposition of Firearms, Explosives, and Ammunition of Former Rebels that grants remuneration for turned-in firearms upon surrender. The weapon-to-money exchange rate ranges from the lowest PHP2000 (USD\$36) for a homemade gun to the highest PHP388,500 (USD\$7000) for a 50 Cal heavy machine gun. The typical rifle used by rebels, such as AK-47 or M4, is valued between PHP45,000 – 58,000 (USD\$813 – 1048).

⁹⁸ “100 ASG fighters, supporters surrender in Sulu,” Manila Bulletin, 30 July 2022.

⁹⁹ E-CLIP policy paper presentation by Philippine government officials, Puerto Princesa, 19 August 2022.

¹⁰⁰ “100 former Abu Sayyaf members vow allegiance to gov’t,” www.philstar.com, 30 July 2022.

The discrepancy between E-CLIP implementation in Sulu and elsewhere in the Philippines illuminates problems in the coordination of peace programs nationwide.¹⁰¹ At the national level, NTF-ELCAC had a budget of PHP19 billion (USD\$343 million) for 2021, but its spending could not be monitored by the parliament or the Commission on Audit (COA). The COA found that the disbursement of E-CLIP funds could not be verified because of inappropriate documentation by the local-level task forces.¹⁰² Also, the involvement of multiple government agencies and local government units implementing their own version of the E-CLIP without a standardised evaluation report made effective auditing almost impossible.¹⁰³ Because of these issues, the House of Representatives cut the allocation for NTF-ELCAC from PHP17.1 billion (USD\$309 million) in 2022 to PHP10 billion (USD\$180 million) for 2023.¹⁰⁴

Between 2017 and late 2022, 896 ASG members and supporters had voluntarily surrendered to AFP JTF-Sulu, but it was not clear how many were enrolled in E-CLIP or how many remained in military cantonment.¹⁰⁵ E-CLIP progress on ex-ASG reintegration has been barely reported in the media since it was launched in July 2022. There were reports in December 2022 that hundreds of ex-ASG members confined in various military cantonments across Sulu province were getting restless, waiting for the anticipated benefits that the government has promised to them.¹⁰⁶

Surrender and reintegration efforts in Sulu were being implemented differently and in a less transparent way than in Basilan province. While there were many overlapping livelihood assistances provided for ASG surrenderees, there was little coordination among them. Compared to Basilan, there was less involvement in Sulu of civil society and thus fewer independent and reliable reports on how the programs were carried out.¹⁰⁷ There was also

¹⁰¹ "DILG chief sees more NPA, ASG surrenders," www.radyonatin.com, 6 August 2022.

¹⁰² The only documentation provided to the COA consist of certificates issued by the Joint AFP and PNP Intelligence Committee (JAPIC) that proved the beneficiaries' eligibility as former rebels. The military was also caught forging fake pictures of rebel surrender ceremonies and using the same pictures to depict ceremonies that took place in other municipalities. "Congress urged to probe possible corruption in 'fake' rebel returnees," www.inquirer.net, 28 December 2019.

¹⁰³ "P5M NTF-ELCAC funds to Central Mindanao flagged for deficiencies," www.rappler.com, 4 August 2021.

¹⁰⁴ The NTF-ELCAC also spent PHP16.4 billion (USD\$296 million) for Barangay Development program, which provided PHP20 million (USD\$361,565) subsidy for each village affected by communist insurgencies, but it failed to provide the full list of villages that have received the funding. Opposition parties in the parliament criticised the Barangay Development program as a pork-barrel scheme for retired generals and to buy votes for the 2022 Presidential Election. After the budget slash, the Barangay Development subsidy program was also reduced to PHP4 million (USD\$72,313) subsidy per village. "P28-B NTF-Elcac fund for barangays is 'pork barrel', DILG told," www.inquirer.net, 6 September 2021; "Proposed NTF-ELCAC budget for 2023 down to P10-B; Infra lower by P68-B," www.inquirer.net, 22 August 2022.

¹⁰⁵ "Military, PTF-ELAC Launch Road to Tourism Program in Sulu," www.11idphilitary.wordpress.com, 29 June 2022.

¹⁰⁶ IPAC interview with a source person from an international donor agency via phone, 6 December 2022.

¹⁰⁷ A Sulu-based NGO, Gagandilan Women, is involved in a reintegration program for 40 ASG surrenderees from Omar municipality in Sulu's 2nd District. The program received funding from Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). However, there is no provincially centralised reintegration program for all ASG surrenderees in Sulu. IPAC interview with the director of Gagandilan Women, Wahida Abdullah, 12 December 2022.

far less involvement of the governor.¹⁰⁸ The lack of a locally designed policy was a telling sign of ownership problems and the paucity of local government initiatives in sustaining the peace process.¹⁰⁹

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The Philippine government claims that the security threat posed by the ASG in the Sulu archipelago has greatly diminished. Since the Marawi siege in 2017, intensified military operations have killed or captured prominent leaders from both kidnapping and pro-IS factions. Hundreds of ASG fighters and supporters in Sulu and Basilan provinces have surrendered to the military. A majority of surrenderees in Basilan have been enrolled in reintegration programs facilitated by the local government, with support from non-government actors and international donors. Those who have given up arms in Sulu are confined in various military cantonments across the province, waiting for benefits promised to them.

These efforts led to an overall decline in ASG-related violence. Occasional skirmishes and small-scale explosions continue to occur, but most local residents interviewed for this report noted a marked improvement in security. According to official estimates, less than a hundred fighters remain scattered across Sulu and Basilan provinces.

The government, however, has a history of making premature declarations of victory against the ASG. In 2014, the U.S. and Philippines Joint Special Operation was also pronounced as a success following a similar drop in violence, only for the ASG to regroup a few months later and resume deadly attacks. What makes things different this time and how sustainable is the present lull in violence?

Three things set these new efforts apart from failed crackdowns against the ASG in the past. First, there has been a global decline in ISIS, which would make it difficult for the group's ideological factions to seek new recruits or obtain funding from abroad. Second, the peace process with the MILF and the MNLF has progressed much further, making it difficult for ASG fighters to seek shelter within rebel strongholds as it did in the past. Third, unlike past government efforts that were focused on eliminating the ASG as a criminal group, especially its leadership, this time, military operations are being followed through with a much broader

¹⁰⁸ Local NGOs involved in PAVE Basilan and the Australian Embassy had proposed to the Sulu governor Abdusakur Tan to design and implement a similar program in his province. Despite the warm welcome, Governor Tan did not make any promise that such a program would be implemented in Sulu province. "Australian Ambassador visits Sulu to support peace and stability in Mindanao," www.matanshipandbayanihan.com, 1 March 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Aside from PAVE in Basilan, the Maguindanao governor Mariam Sangki-Mangudadatu collaborated with the Army 6th Infantry Division launched the surrender and reintegration program named "Agila Haven", which targets members of MILF splinter group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighter (BIFF) and the Maute Group (Daulah Islamiyah). Just like PAVE in Basilan, the Task Force AGILA is led by the provincial administration instead of the military. It provided comprehensive livelihood packages for former BIFF members, which included farm tractors, motorbikes, fishing boats, farming tools, and other forms of livelihood assistance. See "AGILA-HAVEN Program provided livelihood assistance to 177 Former Extremists," www.kalinawnews.com, 6 April 2021.

effort to deal with it as a social entity, by encouraging surrenders and offering alternative livelihoods to former combatants.

So far, these factors have managed to prevent the ASG from regrouping. However, the risks of resurgence remain unless ways are found to sustain the reintegration programs. Some of the persisting challenges stem from the uncertainty over funding availability, the lack of a legal framework guaranteeing the safety of former ASG members, and the risk of recidivism. Finally, the military's dominant role in these initiatives, particularly in managing surrenderees, creates an additional risk of increased friction with the police and local governments.

Addressing the challenges ahead requires taking a longer-term view of measures that were initiated as ad-hoc interventions. A comprehensive assessment should be conducted in 2023 and perhaps again in another two years to follow up on surrenderees. There is also an urgent need to improve the credibility of surrender programs by establishing a legal framework to ensure the safety of former violent extremists enrolled in the reintegration program and restore their rights to travel once they finish their probation.

An evaluation of ongoing reintegration programs should be conducted to identify risks of corruption to prevent disappointment among beneficiaries, which can lead to resentment and renewed grievances against the government. Donor-funded livelihoods programs for former combatants have provided a quick start for their reintegration, but in the long-term, these efforts need to be embedded within broader social development efforts in the region that are funded by local governments.

Finally, there needs to be a national-level review of the military's continued role in the region and identification measures that are needed to ensure that they do not undercut broader efforts to strengthen civilian government.

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