

The 'fire' next time

By Bunn Nagara

MAY 23 was a watershed for the Philippines and international terrorism. But the times have changed considerably since.

Abu Sayyaf bandits then had seriously ganged up with the Maute terrorist group and assorted militants in Marawi City, Mindanao, to stage what became a make-or-break war against society and the state.

The international dimension of this crisis was too clear for some. After Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Hapilon pledged allegiance to Islamic State (IS), he claimed to be the "emir" of Marawi, which he called an IS territory or *wilayat*. Isnilon had apparently contacted somebody in IS somewhere and received approval for the "emir" hat.

He then said he had been directed to hold on to Marawi as territory just like IS had done with Mosul and Raqqa.

Philippine Solicitor-General Jose Calida said it was no longer merely a Philippine rebellion but "an invasion by foreign terrorists who heeded the clarion call of IS". Some others panicked further and imagined an IS invasion all the way from Iraq and Syria.

Isnilon and the Mautes had happened on a patch of Mindanao to wreak more havoc, perhaps also to extort more ransoms, and in the process tried to enlarge their reputation by claiming a link to IS.

Mahmud might have helped in finances.

At the same time Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's IS, no slouch in the propaganda stakes, was only too happy to admit new admirers and extend their fan base if not actual territories. It was mutual enhancement by reciprocal endorsement.

But IS fighters were already warmly nestled in their home bases of Iraq's Mosul and Syria's Raqqa, with more than enough to do.

By the time the first shots were fired in Marawi, they had killed dozens of refugees and wounded another 100 in Hasakah, Syria, and murdered more civilians, soldiers and police in multiple locations in Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Pakistan, Russia and Somalia that month.

IS militants would go on to stage more attacks during the rest of May. It had been a busy month for IS terrorism.

For the victims on the receiving end of their brutality, the months that followed saw much the same.

Meanwhile, their copycat fellow travellers in the Philippines tried to emulate their monstrous style.

In Marawi as in Mosul and Raqqa, the fighting worsened and the casualties mounted. Escalating violence was reciprocated at every turn, as neither the terrorists nor the soldiers would back down.

The security forces had the advantage of numbers and the terrorists had such unconventional tactics as hostage taking and use of human shields and improvised explosive devices. As usual, civilians caught in the middle were at greatest risk.

The residents evacuated, which in Marawi halved the city's near-quarter million population by last month. That enabled both sides in the fighting to reduce more of Marawi, Mosul and Raqqa to rubble.

Soon enough all parties could see that the fighting had entered a decisive phase by mid-2017.

The final result would determine the future of these cities and the terror groups involved – and the result would come sooner rather than later.

As in conventional wars, there were pitched battles and alternating advances and retreats. There were also key locations of strategic value that had to be captured or held.

However, these battles were ultimately not conventional military engagements between armies that soldiers routinely train for. All of these were unconventional or guerilla encounters where terrorists operating without rules were at a tactical advantage.

In Marawi, the Bayabao, Mapandi, Masiu and Unayan bridges were strategic prizes because they provided vital access for raids as well as supplies and other essentials.

In Raqqa, advancing Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fought over control of the Old City wall determining access. Mosul had been liberated earlier from IS in July, but at the cost of almost 6,000 civilians killed, a city in ruins and nearly a million displaced.

Nonetheless superior army firepower in all three cities eventually proved its impact. The high cost in “collateral damage” would be another matter.

Residents’ groups and human rights activists would be at odds with military leaders in assessing the actual human cost. For many however, the main issue is still success in evicting the terrorists from their lairs.

Like Marawi, Raqqa has proven to be a “tough nut” to crack. Although the SDF had reportedly come to control half the city by July, it would take another three months before there was any prospect of victory.

Yet the long and hard work of liberating IS-infested cities was taking steady effect. After Iraq’s Mosul was won in July came Tal Afar in August and Rihana and Hawiza in September.

In Syria, Deir el-Zour was liberated in September followed by Mayadeen this month and finally Raqqa last Tuesday. The tide had at last turned against IS.

The situation called for celebration but these did not come without a measure of careless optimism and dangerous overconfidence.

In July after IS-controlled Mosul fell to advancing forces, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared “total victory”. The next day serious clashes broke out again.

Eventually Mosul was pacified, but it had been a three-year battle to reclaim the city and at great cost.

The hard slog to rehabilitate cities, societies and people has only just begun.

Worse, nobody can seriously guarantee IS will never return. If Iraqi authorities had lost the country’s second-biggest city before, how can they make sure it does not happen again? These war-ravaged countries have weakened institutions and law enforcement and security capacities.

In Syria, tribal and local groups are now pressing for amnesty for Syrian IS members although not forgiving foreign ones.

They say local IS fighters should be released to ensure the safety of their hostages. In practice this allows them use of human shields so they may escape and possibly regroup.

Such situations cannot provide the conditions for certain victory, let alone total victory. Meanwhile Syria still faces obstacles in rebuilding and resettlement even after winning back Aleppo last December.

Now “newly-won” Raqqa itself urgently needs substantial aid immediately. Apart from security, families and children in particular lack food, water and medicines.

These are the kinds of problems confronting terror-besieged localities including Marawi. In fighting terrorists, the Philippine government responded with little more than a Mindanao-wide martial law and army firepower.

Terrorist leaders in Marawi like Isnilon, Mahmud and the Mautes have been eliminated, but what next? There is always a second echelon to move up the ranks.

At the height of the battle President Duterte even considered declaring nationwide martial law. These measures may have helped win back Marawi, or what is left of it, but they cannot win back the hearts and minds of rebels or the confidence of local communities.

Neither can they prevent another terrorist attack that may be even more determined.

Force is not always the best option when the main purpose is a peaceful society rather than simply fighting violent aggressors after their attacks.

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