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Philippines: Statement on the imposition of martial law in Mindanao

by PLM

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President Rodrigo Duterte declared martial law in Mindanao through Proclamation 216 issued while he was still visiting Russia on May 23, 2017. This was in reaction to the attacks made by the Maute Group, a Moro group supposedly inspired by or with links to Isis (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in Marawi City, Lanao del Sur.

According to the proclamation, the Maute Group took over a hospital in Marawi, set up several checkpoints within the city, burned down government and private facilities, inflicted casualties on the government forces, and flew the flag of Isis in several areas – acts which purportedly constitute rebellion, a basis for the declaration of martial law in Mindanao. The Maute Group has been identified by the government as a terrorist group responsible for a number of attacks, bombings, and killings in Lanao del Sur. It was also responsible for the mass jailbreak in Marawi which freed their jailed comrades and other detainees in August 2016.

On May 23, when the military and police forces conducted an operation in Marawi to arrest Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Hapilon, the Abu Sayyaf forces fought back and called reinforcements from the Maute Group. About 50 came and engaged the government forces in a shooting spree.

At least one policeman and two soldiers were killed, while 12 other government troops sustained wounds. Many members of the Abu Sayyaf and the Maute were also reported killed.

Many have observed that the declaration of martial law is an overkill response. The night of the attacks, the military declared that the situation had been under control. Hence, the government could have just responded with more police and military operations to hunt down the terrorist groups.

The PLM sees the declaration of martial law an indication of the failure of the Duterte government to solve the conflict in Mindanao through the peace process it supposedly initiated with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The Maute Group, the Abu Sayaff, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and other groups used to belong to the MILF and probably have connections with them till now. Most have become bandit groups but some espoused Islamist convictions founded on perceived national and religious oppression.

Martial law will only fan the flames of war in Mindanao. It is not a solution to the long-festering insurgency in the area. The solution has always been the eradication of the roots of poverty and national oppression of the Moro people and the various indigenous groups in Mindanao.

Duterte's declaration of martial law also confirms the drift of his administration to the Right. Just recently, Duterte allowed anti-mining activist Gina Lopez to be removed by his cabal from Congress as DENR secretary and replaced by an ex-general associated with mining interests. He has also appointed several ex-generals and military men to government posts, making his administration the most "militarized" one since the Marcos period.

The martial law regime, with Duterte as the commander-in-chief, will have the military and police as its main implementors, therefore its main beneficiaries. When Duterte explained that his martial law will look like martial law under Marcos, it is also to spite the limitations and safeguards put forth by the Constitution in declaring martial law today.

Martial law will only induce violence from various groups engaged in armed resistance. Today, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) called on its army, the New People's Army, to intensify guerrilla actions in Mindanao. The declaration of martial law clearly puts to risk even the peace talks with the CPP which has a large number of its forces in Mindanao. As long as the climate of martial law persists, and the political negotiations are stalled, the insurgency will continue unabated.

As a response, we call on various progressive and democratic forces to unite in the broadest coalition possible against the declaration of martial law. If Duterte is testing the waters in his open longing to declare martial law all over the country, we have to ensure that today's declaration will not prosper if ever there is a Congress review on this matter, and during the deliberation in the Supreme Court once the cases against it have been filed by various groups. The only assurance to this is our capacity to unleash massive mobilization that will reverse the tide of authoritarian rule in the country.