

Marawi, Mindanao (Philippines): Isis rampage in Philippines continues with 19 civilians killed

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Official death toll from week of fighting rises to at least 85 as militants clash with security forces in Muslim-majority city.

Islamist militants locked in street-to-street battles with security forces in a southern Philippine city have killed 19 civilians, the military said Sunday, bringing the official death toll from nearly a week of fighting to at least 85.

The violence prompted the president, Rodrigo Duterte, to declare martial law on Tuesday across the southern third of the Philippines to quell what he said was a fast-growing threat of militants linked to the Islamic State group.

Authorities said the militants had killed 19 civilians in Marawi, a mostly Muslim-populated city of 200,000 people. These included three women and a child who were found dead near a university.

“These are civilians, women. These terrorists are anti-people. We found their bodies while conducting rescue operations [on Saturday],” regional military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jo-ar Herrera said.

An Agence France-Presse photographer saw another eight bodies by a road in the outskirts of Marawi on Sunday, with local residents identifying them as employees of a rice mill and a medical college.

Herrera said the military had yet to investigate the reported deaths.

The violence began when dozens of gunmen went on a rampage throughout Marawi after security forces attempted to arrest Isnilon Hapilon, a veteran Filipino militant regarded as the local leader of Isis.

The gunmen planted black Isis flags, took a priest and up to 14 other people hostage from a church, and set fire to buildings.

Thirteen soldiers, two policemen and 51 militants have died in the fighting, according to authorities. This brings the combined official death toll to at least 85.

Most of the city’s residents have fled because of the fighting, which has seen the military heavily bomb residential areas where the militants were believed to be hiding.

The military announced on Saturday, the start of the Holy month of Ramadan, that it would intensify the bombing campaign.

"In as much as we would like to avoid collateral damage, these rebels are forcing the hand of government by hiding and holding out inside private homes, government buildings and other facilities," military spokesman Brigadier-General Restituto Padilla said.

"Their refusal to surrender is holding the city captive. Hence, it is now increasingly becoming necessary to use more surgical airstrikes to clear the city and to bring this rebellion to a quicker end."

Duterte and military chiefs have said most of the militants belong to the local Maute group, which they estimate has about 260 armed followers and has declared allegiance to Isis.

But Duterte has said local criminals are backing the Maute in Marawi.

Agence France-Presse

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