

Marawi (Mindanao): “A dramatic escalation in the intensity of the fighting” - The Philippine ‘Suicide Squad’ saving civilians trapped on Isis frontline

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Team of 30 volunteers brave sniper fire and rocket strikes to rescue children and families trapped in Marawi.

They go by the name “Suicide Squad”, and the reason why becomes abundantly clear amid the smoke and carnage of the besieged Philippine city of Marawi.

This was once a busy urban landscape with a population of nearly 200,000, but in just a week it has been torn apart by Islamic State-linked rebels, who now occupy large areas.

The Philippine army has arrived en masse with helicopter gunships and tanks to try to dislodge the rebels. Trapped in the middle are about 2,000 civilians with no certainty of a safe route out.

That’s where the ragtag bunch of 30 volunteers comes in. The Suicide Squad has become a vital lifeline, driving towards the frontlines, dodging sniper fire and rocket strikes, to rescue civilians hiding in their homes.

The conflict lines in this urban battle are blurred and dynamic, with rebel gunmen sneaking from house to house. Added to that is the very real threat from the government side. On Wednesday 10 Philippine troops were killed in a “friendly fire” incident as the military battered rebel positions.

“The militants know the area well,” said Ross Alonto, who coordinates the squad’s two rescue teams from an army-run complex on hill that overlooks the city. “They can set up good vantage points for sniping.”

Over the past seven days, squad members have been shot at numerous times and dodged artillery shells. They have little protective equipment: some wear white plastic climbing helmets, which might deflect falling rocks but would be useless against bullets.

Before heading out they strap on white armbands and attach a white flag to their cars to signal that they are noncombatants. “We’re like the White Helmets,” said Abdul Azis Lomondot, a 25-year-old squad member, referring to the humanitarians in Syria famed for pulling people from the rubble.

But unlike the White Helmets, many in the Suicide Squad have no medical experience. Lomondot studies international relations at university. “I have no medical training but I want to help,” he said. “We risk our lives. We didn’t expect this invasion – Marawi was a peaceful place before. Now it’s under siege.”

The squad, largely students and civil servants, escaped the chaos as the insurgents rampaged through the lakeside city last Tuesday, burning a cathedral, breaking out prisoners and taking hostages. Ninety per cent of civilians in the majority-Muslim city have fled.

Some of the volunteers returned to retrieve relatives and friends left behind. They met at a camp for the displaced and agreed to coordinate to save others. A couple of days later, when the government set up a hotline for trapped civilians to call for help, the squad formed.

"You could say it was spontaneous," said Alonto. "We were receiving calls from civilians and plotting their locations on a map so we could go and get them."

On Wednesday this week, military helicopters launched rockets and fired machine-guns at central districts, as tropical storm clouds gathered overhead. Black smoke rose throughout the day from Marawi's skyline, which was dotted with corrugated roofs turned red with rust.

Thirty security forces, 19 civilians and 89 gunmen have been killed, according to army figures. The number could be much higher as soldiers pushing into new areas say there are corpses in the streets.

Many people are out of reach. The Suicide Squad received a desperate call from three people on Wednesday morning. Fearful of encountering Isis fighters in the streets, the trio decided to swim across the river to escape. They have yet to be found.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has called for a temporary ceasefire to allow people to leave, but rebel-held areas remain inaccessible.

"As long as the bullets are firing, we cannot [rescue people]," said Martin Thalmann, deputy head of the ICRC Philippines delegation. "Because we would just completely put at risk the lives of our staff. We cannot do this kind of thing." He said there had been a dramatic escalation in the intensity of the fighting in the last three days.

"We have seen a lot of heavy fire, artillery and aerial bombardment. And obviously with this type of weaponry, we are much more concerned about the collateral damage to the civilians who are trapped in their houses. And how the [military] targets are chosen," he said.

"I spoke with the generals in Marawi. They assured us that they are very careful in selecting the targets but you know when you see the number of bombs falling ... the number of artillery shooting, you are very worried for the civilians in the city."

On Tuesday Lomondot found three children who had been hiding on the bottom floor of their house for a week with no tap water or electricity. Unlike most, their family had managed to stay fed as they owned a grocery shop attached to their home.

Sixteen-year-old Amar Usman Jamail and his two sisters Amaliah, 10, and Jamielah, 18, had remained with their parents who had hoped the fighting would end and so stayed at home to prevent looting.

Amar said that when he peeked out of the window at night he had seen men in the streets wearing black face masks and carrying assault rifles. "We were afraid but they passed through. Houses nearby were burning."

The family lived off canned tuna and sardines for several days until they saw army soldiers taking up positions in their neighbourhood. Jamielah had become dehydrated and was vomiting so they

pleaded with the soldiers to allow the rescuers in.

The Suicide Squad got the call and rushed through the empty streets to pick them up. The children's father refused to leave but sent Amar and Amaliah to accompany their sick sister.

In the government-run medical centre on the edge of the city, the two sat beside Jamielah, who lay asleep with a saline drip in her arm.

"We'll look after each other," Amar said.

Oliver Holmes in Marawi

P.S.

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