

# Philippines: Western Media Is Distorting Reality, People and Army Unite to Battle “ISIS”

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*Featured image: Marawi City ground zero*

*Covering the recent battle for the city of Marawi on Mindanao Island in the Southern Philippines, the Western media has been grossly exaggerating unconfirmed reports and rumors. It has been spreading twisted information and ‘facts’.*

At the beginning of July, I visited Mindanao as one of only a few foreigners allowed inside the besieged city of Marawi and to its surrounding area.

I spoke to local people, to the IDPs – those who managed to escape the city taken over by the jihadists. I also managed to discuss the situation with the highest commanders of the military in charge of the combat, including General Ramiro Rey and Lt. Colonel Jo-Ar Herrera. I encountered many soldiers, civil servants, and relief workers.

My contacts in the capital informed me via text messages that I had been “red-flagged,” clearly, by the pro-US faction in the Philippine military. So before my presence was finally cleared from Manila, I was detained and held in a provisional military base in the city of Saguilaran. Here I was “softly” interrogated by military intelligence. A few steps away, a howitzer was firing artillery toward ISIS positions in Marawi, some 10 kilometers distant.

“So you believe the United States is responsible for spreading terrorism all over the world,” I was asked late at night by one of the officers, point blank, while local starlet was imitating old Chuck Berry’s hit “Johnny B. Goode” on TV, sound blasted all over the barracks. It was clear that someone ‘behind the scenes’ was busy studying my published work.



## Driving through Marawi

The Western establishment media and various servile NGOs (including those which are “defending human rights” in several rebellious and independent-minded countries) consistently demonize President Duterte, an anti-imperialist, progressive leader who enjoys well over 80 percent approval rating. It is no secret in the Philippines there are two distinct factions inside the military – one supports the president and his drive for independence from the West. The other, which is trained and often corrupted by Washington and other Western capitals, would love to see him go.

The pro-Western fraction obviously wanted me out, detained, perhaps even disappeared. The other one that stands by its president wanted me to see the truth, even to be allowed into Marawi.

A final decision was made late at night in Manila. I was released and granted permission to work in the besieged city. But even when the top commanders personally called the camp, there was, at least for a while, apparent reluctance to let me go.

My first reaction after visiting the Marawi front was one of shock and outrage. What I witnessed was fundamentally different from what has repeatedly been said by most of the Western mass media outlets, as well as pro-Western local news channels broadcasting from Manila.

It is evident, right from the start, that Marawi is not “totally destroyed,” as has been reported. Most of it is standing and standing firm. I would estimate that only between 20 and 30 percent of the houses and buildings, (most of them in the wealthy core center of the city) have sustained heavy damage.

It was explained to me during the presentation by top army commanders that the ISIS-related jihadists began their offensive on May 23rd 2017 and their plan was to take full control of the town by the time Ramadan was to begin (May 26th). The military spoiled their plans; it counter-attacked and managed to contain the terrorists in just one neighborhood, retaining or regaining control of all the other ‘barangays.’



High quality tents for IDPs

Undoubtedly there were heavy losses, and, because of the palpable sense of fear after tremendous brutality unleashed by the terrorists, a substantial movement of IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons). But it was never 400,000 people escaping the area, as reported in the

West, but approximately 200,000 (the number once peaked at about 300,000 for a short time).

There has been no “indiscriminate bombing” of the civilians. I witnessed both incoming and outgoing howitzer fire and also very limited bombing from the air; it was all targeted and mostly precise, aiming at the position of the terrorists. As in all other war zones where I have been working, I refused any protection, including helmets and bulletproof vests. That allowed me to remain more mobile. I did manage to come ‘very close’ to the front. It was clear the fighting and bombing were strictly contained to one area, no more than one-kilometer square. Even there, the mosques and almost all other buildings and houses were still standing, as is demonstrated on my photographs.

Anti-Duterte NGOs and many Western governments claim that they ‘worry’ about the martial law imposed on Mindanao Island. I was told that in and around Marawi (or anywhere else on the Island), the martial law carried no brutal consequences. Even the curfew (9PM-5AM) is laxly implemented.



General Rey – Head of Joint Task Force Group  
Ranao

Brigadier General Ramiro Rey (head of the Joint Task Force Group, Ranao) explained to me in Marawi City:

“The difference between this martial law and those that were imposed during the reign of Ferdinand Marcos is that now the military is mainly doing real fighting while providing assistance to the civilians. I absolutely don’t interfere with the work of local elected government officials. I’m actually encouraging them to do their job as before, asking them to contact me only when my assistance is needed. I never took, and I don’t intend to take, control of the area.”

Local government officials and volunteers working for various relief agencies and NGO’s operating in the area have confirmed what General Rey said.

During my work in the conflict zone, I detected no fear among the residents. The relationship between the army and civilians was clearly friendly and cordial. As the military convoys were moving between the cities of Illigan and Marawi, both children and adults were smiling, waving, some cheering the soldiers.

In the camps housing the IDPs, there was almost unanimous consensus: while many citizens

of Mindanao Island in general and the Marawi area in particular would most likely welcome more autonomy from Manila, during this ongoing and brutal conflict almost all local people have been supportive of the military and government efforts.

“We hope that both Filipino and foreign jihadi cadres would soon be crushed,” was an almost unanimous statement coming from the local people.

### The Military Perspective

In the cities of Iligan and Marawi I was shown detailed maps clearly indicating positions of the ISIS and the military.

Both Lt. Colonel Jun Abad from Ranao Camp and the commanding officer, General Rey, gave me a clear and detailed briefing. As of July 3rd, the Agus River represented the ‘borderline’ between the ISIS-held area and the zone liberated and controlled by the army.

General Rey explained during our meeting in the Municipality of Marawi City (now the complex is also serving as the headquarters of the war theatre):

“The ISIS wants to establish their state on the island of Mindanao – an Islamic caliphate – right here in the Province of Lanao del Sur.”

But that’s not what the majority of local people want. Before President Duterte came to power little over one year ago, social situation in many parts of Mindanao was desperate and therefore there was at least some support for radical ‘solutions’. Since then, however, things changed dramatically. Healthcare, education and public housing are improving. Indiscriminate mining by multi-national companies has been deterred. People here; as well as in almost all other parts of the Philippines finally feel hopeful and optimistic about their future.

This converts into great support for both the government and the military.



Filipino soldier going to action with second-hand US helmet

There is no doubt the entire city will be freed, soon, most likely in July or August. The only reason why it did not happen yet is that the terrorists are using hostages, both Christians and Muslims, as human shields. President Duterte, General Rey, and other civilian and military officials are trying to avoid unnecessary human losses.

Cultural topography of the area is also very complex. Near the front line I was told by one of the top commanding army officers:

“We could take the city in just one day, but there would be great civilian casualties. The houses in this area are very sturdy; they are 2-3 stories high and fortified, as there are constant and brutal family feuds, called ‘rido’, raging here, and have been for centuries.”

But to delay the liberation of Marawi is also very dangerous.

“The terrorists began using captured women as sex slaves,” explained Major Malvin Ligutan, standing in front of a temporary military base in Saguwaran.

Despite all the horrors of the Marawi war, the army refused to use brutal tactics, even after it found out that various local citizens clearly miscalculated and before the conflict began, offered substantial support to the ISIS-related terrorists.

Captain John Mark Silva Onipig clarified:

“These people belonging to the ISIS are not only terrorists, but they are also criminals. They were dealing in drugs... And some local people knew that... Actually, locals knew quite a lot; they knew about the presence of the terrorists in the area long before all this started, but they never reported it to the authorities.”

“How did the terrorists get hold of so many weapons?” I wanted to know.

“In the Philippines, those who have money can buy as many weapons as they want on the black market.”

The situation is extremely sensitive as there is clearly the involvement of foreign fighters. On June 30th, in Saguwaran, Major Malvin Ligutan admitted, hesitantly:

“In one of the safe houses, we found passports issued in Indonesia, Malaysia and several Arab countries.”

A month ago I wrote an essay exposing the complex network of Western-sponsored terrorism in Asia ([“Washington Jihad Express: Indonesia, Afghanistan, Syria and Philippines”](#)). I argued that in the 1980’s, Indonesian and Malaysian jihadists, indoctrinated by the Southeast Asian brand of extreme anti-Communism, went to fight in Afghanistan against the socialist governments of Karmal, and then Mohammad Najibullah, with the ultimate goal of destroying the Soviet Union.

Hardened and further brainwashed, they returned home to Southeast Asia, participated in several ethnic strives and pogroms (including those in Ambon and Poso), and then, in order to 'bridge the generational gap', embarked on the coaching of a young generation of terrorists, who eventually ended up fighting in Syria and recently in the Philippines.

My essay was full of facts, and I put into it various testimonies of Southeast Asian academics, thinkers, and even of one active and prominent 'jihadi cadre' who is now living in Jakarta.

In the Indonesian city of Bandung, Prof. ImanSoleh, a professor at the Faculty of Social and Political Science (University of Padjadjaran- UNPAD) offered his take on why the West is now so obsessed with destabilizing and smearing the Philippines and its current rebellious administration:

"Since World War Two, the U.S. was afraid of so-called 'domino effects'. Among other things that are now happening in the Philippines under president Duterte, the government is curbing activities of the multi-national mining conglomerates, and the West cannot accept that. Philippines are putting its environmental concerns above the short-term profits! For the millions of left-wing activists here in Indonesia and all over Southeast Asia, President Duterte is a role model."

It is no secret that the West punishes such 'bad paradigms' brutally and decisively.

Prof. Soleh continued:

"I think all that is happening is not just to 'destabilize' the Philippines, but also because the country has conflict areas that could be 'nurtured'. The best example is the predominantly Muslim island of Mindanao, vs. the rest of the Philippines, which is predominantly a Catholic country..."

The West is regularly using 'jihad,' directly and indirectly, to destabilize socialist, anti-imperialist, and just patriotic countries and governments. In the past, it managed to ruin countries like Afghanistan, Indonesia (1965) and Syria. Many believe that the Philippines is the latest addition to the 'hit-list.'

The China & Russia Connection

As Drei Toledo, a prominent Philippine journalist, educator and pro-Duterte activist, originally from Mindanao, explained:

"The reason why the West is hostile toward President Duterte is simple: he is working hard to reach a peace agreement with China, a country that is seen by Washington as its arch-enemy. Another 'adversary of the West,' Russia, is admired by Duterte and increasingly by his people. Recently, Russia and the Philippines signed a defense agreement. The president is also forging close ties with Cuba, particularly in the area of health... Before Duterte became our President, poverty by design in Philippines was restored and perpetuated by the U.S. and Malaysia-controlled Cojuangco-Aquino clan.

Foreign and local entities that have long benefited financially from Philippines being a weak state are now threatened overwhelmingly by President Duterte's



unifying agenda to create a socialist system in the Philippines.”

Ms. Toledo pointed her accusative finger at Malaysia:

“Malaysia benefits from Mindanao being in a perpetual state of chaos and conflict because this means we can never reclaim oil-rich Sabah.”

She also doesn’t spare Indonesia and its sinister political (anti-socialist and anti-Communist) as well as economic interests:

“As exposed by Rigoberto D. Tiglao, a Filipino diplomat and writer, Indonesian magnate Anthoni Salim, not only does have total control or substantial stakes in local mainstream media papers and networks, his conglomerate in Philippines is also based on telecoms, power, water distribution, and other public utilities.”

Or more precisely: it is based on making sure that ‘public utilities’ will never become truly ‘public’, remaining in private hands. Salim’s ‘empire’ already brought great damage to India, particularly to West Bengal where, some argue, because of allowing it to operate and to implement its brutal feudal-capitalist practices, the CPI (M) (Communist Party of India - Marxist) managed to thoroughly disgust local voters and to lose power.

The Human Cost

Nobody could deny the gravity of the situation.

I witnessed exhausted glances of the people from Marawi, now living in a rescue center built on the land of the town hall of Saguwaran.

“Yesterday two infants died,” I’m told by Amer Hassan, a student volunteer from Mindanao State University (MSU).

The reason was “different water, malnutrition, exhaustion...”

I wanted to know more, and Amer continues:

“People are still in shock... They can’t believe what is happening. Especially those whose houses were destroyed; those who lost their relatives, everything...”

While the West is constantly criticizing, does it provide help? Amer just shrugs his shoulders:

“There is no foreign help coming... Almost all that we have here comes from Manila, either from the government or local agencies. Duterte is working very hard, helping our people.”



Mimbalawag family haunted by horrid memories

A family of three, Camal Mimbalawag, his wife Ima and one-month-old baby Mohammad, is squeezed into a tiny space at the center. Their memories are bleak. Ima gives her account almost mechanically:

"We were in Marawi during the first stage of the attack. I was pregnant, ready to give birth. We were in the city hall when ISIS attacked... They erected checkpoints; divided people into groups... they pointed guns at us... They asked: 'Muslim or not?'...and 'If Muslim, then recite 'Shahadat.' If cannot, you get killed or taken as a hostage... We saw corpses of those killed, eaten by dogs under the burning sun..."

The battle for the city of Marawi is raging. I face it from the highest floor of the building, destroyed by ISIS snipers, a place where an Australian reporter was hit just two days earlier.

It is not Aleppo, but it could have been, if not for the heroic counter-attack of the army.

Marawi is just one new chapter in the already long book of horrors of brutal religious terrorist acts, most of them directly or indirectly triggered by Western imperialism. In the first wave of its fight against the secular socialist Muslim governments, the West destabilized Iran, Egypt and Indonesia. Then came the Afghanistan 'gambit', followed by the arch-brutal destruction of Iraq and Libya. Then it was Syria's turn.

'Jihad' is consistently used against Russia, China as well as the former Central Asian Soviet republics.

All this I described in my 840-page book: ["Exposing Lies Of The Empire"](#), but one can never write fast enough and fully catch up with the crimes committed by the West.

It is often easy to pinpoint Western involvement in the religious conflicts, particularly in such places as Afghanistan and Syria. In the Philippines, the link is still indirect, well concealed, but it certainly exists.

To rebel against the Western Empire is always a costly and bloody affair. It often leads to coups sponsored by Washington, London or Paris, and even to direct military conflicts, interventions and full-scale wars.



But by now, the people of the Philippines have had it 'up to here'. They had enough of being submissive; enough of being plundered while remaining silent. They are assembling behind their president. Duterte's popularity is still around 75%. The army is clearly winning the war against the hardened local and foreign jihadists. Relief operations are effective and well organized. Things are just fine.



Marawi – rooftop devastated by ISIS snipers

In only one year, the country has diametrically changed. To break the spirit of the liberated masses, to force people back onto their knees would be difficult, perhaps almost impossible, even if jihadi terror is unleashed brutally.

Almost 100 soldiers already lost their lives. Just one day before I encounter General Rey, six of his men were injured. It is said that 800 or more civilians died. Nobody knows exactly how many terrorists were killed. It is real war: tough and merciless as all wars are, but in this case, the 'newly independent' country is clearly winning.

It is an incredible sight: some soldiers, patriotic and determined, are still wearing those helmets with the US flags engraved into them, or some old Israeli bulletproof vests. But have no doubts: this is real, new country! Totally different Philippines and Marawi is one of the first and toughest tests it will have to endure.

The war united people and the army. No matter what the West and local corporate media are saying, most Filipinos know: this is their struggle; this is their president and their military fighting against something extremely foreign, violent and dreadful.

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Andre Vltchek is a philosopher, novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. His latest books are: "Exposing Lies Of The Empire" and "Fighting Against Western Imperialism". Discussion with Noam Chomsky: On Western Terrorism. Point of No Return is his critically acclaimed political novel. Oceania - a book on Western imperialism in the South Pacific. His provocative book about Indonesia: "Indonesia - The Archipelago of Fear". Andre is making films for teleSUR and Press TV. After living for many years in Latin America and Oceania, Vltchek presently resides and works in East Asia and the Middle East. He can be reached through his website or his Twitter.

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