**Philippine sectarian bloodshed unites Muslims and Christians**

Despite Islamist militants’ attempts to cause division, their violence has prompted selfless interfaith compassion

[Oliver Holmes](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/oliver-holmes) in Marawi and Iligan City Sat 3 Jun ‘17

A Filipino who escaped Marawi after being trapped by fighting between Islamist militants and soldiers. Photograph: Francis R Malasig/EPA

[Oliver Holmes](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/oliver-holmes) in Marawi and Iligan City

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They were devout Christians, but it was Islamic prayers that would ultimately save their lives.

Islamist militants in black masks were stationed on bridges – the only way out of the [besieged city of Marawi](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/28/marawi-isis-rampage-in-philippines-continues-with-19-more-killed) – looking for Christian hostages. A priest had already been kidnapped. Risking his own life, a local Muslim leader had hidden dozens of Christians in a rice mill.

“He was giving them an orientation,” said the city’s bishop, Edwin de la Peña. “How to respond to questions, to recite prayers, to wear their veils, how to say *assalamu alaikum* (peace be upon you).”

The plan worked, but others were not so fortunate, de la Peña said. “When they were asked if they were Christians, they said yes readily. So they were pulled out. And we just heard that they were killed and thrown down into a ravine.”

Residents of Marawi, on the Mindanao island of the [Philippines](https://www.theguardian.com/world/philippines), were fleeing a surprise takeover by fighters claiming to be Islamic State supporters. They left a burning cathedral and corpses in their wake.

Stories such as these of brutal sectarian bloodshed, but also selfless interfaith compassion, have rippled across the Philippines. The country feels like it is on a precipice, pushed there by pockets of militancy in the south and a president with a self-declared, lifelong leaning towards violence.

The government says the Maute, a local criminal group turned Islamist militia, had planned its assault for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan to impress Isis’s Middle Eastern leadership, and attract foreign funds and fighters.

Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippine president, has [declared martial law](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/23/philippine-president-rodrigo-duterte-moscow-meet-favourite-hero-vladimir-putin) across Mindanao, the country’s southernmost island of about 20 million people, and made a promise to soldiers who are battering Marawi with airstrikes and artillery that he will protect them if they commit [crimes including rape](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/27/rodrigo-duterte-jokes-to-soldiers-that-they-can-women-with-impunity).

As a leader who regularly praises the country’s former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, who ruled for much of his two decades with martial law, Duterte has said he may extend army control to the rest of the island nation. “I will not allow the country to go to the dogs,” he said. “My orders are: spare no one.”

On Friday, as the country was still reeling from the bloodshed in the south, a gunman [stormed a casino](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/01/philippines-manila-explosions-and-gunshots-heard-at-manila-entertainment-resort) in Manila, five minutes from the international airport, and doused poker tables with petrol. Thirty-six trapped guests and workers [suffocated from smoke](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/02/manila-casino-attack-philippines).

Isis claimed responsibility for the attack, but police said it was a botched robbery because the man, described as a foreigner, did not shoot anyone. The fire department suggested he had gambling debts.

Yet the result was the same: the Philippines is on edge. The direction the country takes may be determined by how it reacts to Marawi, where helicopter and tank strikes have been unable to dislodge the fighters for nearly two weeks.

The vast majority of the city’s 200,000 inhabitants have fled, many walking for hours down lush tropical hills to Iligan City, 24 miles (38km) away on the coast.

Both cities, the first 95% Muslim and the other majority Christian, have a fractured past. Spanish and American colonisers squeezed the local Muslim and indigenous populations with overwhelming Christian settlement and mass conversions.

At its most ugly, in the early 1970s, Marcos was accused of encouraging bloodthirsty Christian extremists to fight against a Muslim separatist insurgency. The Ilaga (meaning rat) Christian paramilitary group was accused of several massacres. The [most well-known case](http://www.rappler.com/views/imho/137701-manili-massacre-remember) was the slaughter of more than 70 people by militants throwing grenades into a mosque.

Marawi, its full name being the Islamic City of Marawi, is part of an autonomous region of Mindanao that has its own government, with shariah law for Muslims and taxation separated from the state. Iligan is run by the Christian-majority central government.

Lingering mistrust still pervades the two communities, but many on both sides remember the dangers of division. The Catholic church in Iligan has put up signs welcoming the displaced.

“Our prayers and best wishes to all our Muslims brothers and sisters as you observe the holy month of Ramadan,” reads one hung at the main cathedral. Below stands a statue of Mary, and worshippers light candles.

The militants have sought to spread hate in the communities, but de la Peña said the opposite has happened, especially as people learn of Muslims helping Christians flee. The citizens of Iligan are sheltering hundreds of families.

“This is something that [the militants] did not expect. They tried so hard to divide us, but in the end, the strategy brought us together,” he said.

The bishop spoke to the Observer from a church-run warehouse where canned food, rice and hygiene kits were being stored, ready to send to Iligan schools that have been converted into camps for the displaced.

Edgar Aguillar, a volunteer who flew down from Manila, said aid organisations had had to shift the focus of their programmes away from natural disaster relief.

“We realised that we couldn’t cook food with anything we’d used before. It wasn’t halal – the pots had been full of pork. We needed new pans and knives,” he said at a school that was sheltering families from Marawi.

The response from locals had been inspiring, he said. Businesspeople had provided discounts on chicken and, behind him, the owner of a rickety private bus normally used by commuters had donated his time and vehicle.

Internecine killings during the Marcos era nearly emptied both cities of minority populations. Since then, priests and imams in the area have pushed for reconciliation.

The mufti of Marawi has declared the militants un-Islamic, while de la Peña said the fact that Muslims sought refuge in Iligan was proof that the communities had moved forward, even if some “deep-seated prejudice” remained.

In previous times of conflict or during tropical storms, Muslim evacuees would flee to the mountains and Christians would move towards the coast, he said. “But now, they are all here. They feel safer here. That indicates a type of trust that has built up. Forty years of reconciliation, we cannot just put that aside,” said de la Peña.

The few hotels in Iligan have their corridors filled with Marawi residents, often more than 10 crammed into one room.

Sitting in an old jeep with his seven children and wife, Jamel Abdul Panaraag, 40, said they walked for seven hours to escape Marawi. He returned later to get the car.

“The Christians help us,” the construction worker said. “Also, some are afraid. They accuse of us links to the terrorists.”

Iligan’s vice-mayor, a priest who has taken a leave of absence, said the city had increased security patrols and a curfew had been implemented amid concerns of an impending attack by militants posing as refugees.

“We knew already that there was this plan of the terrorists,” Jemar Vera Cruz said. “We want to see to it that there are no bad elements in our city.”

Concerned about a “prevailing culture of prejudice” against Muslims, he was heartened by residents’ responses.

“People’s hearts are like gold,” he said. “I have a friend who has only enough food for his family. He accommodated 20 evacuees in his house that is only good for two people.”

Accounts of Muslims protecting Christians in Marawi and the response of Iligan to the displaced has brought the two cities together in a way not seen for four decades.

“In some ways, it has united a lot of people,” he said. “If you come in Iligan, we will take care of you.”

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