

US wanted terror leader may have fled Philippine city: army



Isnilon Hapilon (2nd L), leader of hardline group Abu Sayyaf looks on, as the group plan an attack on Marawi (file photo)

Marawi

One of America's most wanted terrorists may have escaped a five-week battle with Islamist militants in a southern Philippine city, which began with a raid to capture him, the military said yesterday.

Isnilon Hapilon, a veteran

Filipino militant said to be the leader of the Islamic State (IS) group in Southeast Asia, has not been seen in the battle zone in Marawi City, said Lieutenant General Carlito Galvez, head of the military's Western Mindanao Command.

An attempt by government

troops to arrest Hapilon in Marawi on May 23 triggered a rampage by Islamist militants flying black IS flags and backed by some foreign fighters who seized parts of the mainly Muslim city.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared martial law in Marawi and

the entire southern region of Mindanao, unleashing an offensive to crush what he said was an attempt by the jihadist group to establish a province in the area.

"He (Hapilon) has not been seen in the area. We have some reports that he was already able to slip somewhere but as

of now we are still confirming the reports," Galvez said in an interview with DZBB radio station.

Asked if Hapilon was on the run, he said: "Yes, yes because reportedly he suffered a lot of casualties. Majority of his group, more than half, were casualties." (AFP)

CNN uses sketch artist at no-camera WH briefing

Washington

US media went back to the past on Friday to cover the daily White House press briefing, after President Donald Trump's administration banned cameras from the event.

Cable news channel CNN sent sketch artist Bill Hennessy to the famous West Wing press room, a change from the American courtrooms where he normally works.

Instead of broadcasting the briefing live, CNN carried only audio of White House spokesman Sean Spicer's session with journalists.

The channel then prominently featured Hennessy's sketches in its afternoon programming while stressing that cameras had not been allowed.

The Trump administration, which has a largely adversarial relationship with the media, has been restricting coverage of the White House press briefing of late, either by not holding it every day, or by banning cameras.

Pentagon's nuke-proof 'Doomsday' planes damaged by tornado

Washington

Two of the Pentagon's specially reinforced "Doomsday" planes, designed to withstand the heat from a nuclear blast, were grounded after being damaged by a tornado, the Air Force said Friday.

The E-4B Boeing 747s, built in the 1970s during the Cold War, are essentially flying command centres that can refuel in the sky and are designed to remain airborne for days on end in times of crisis.

The Air Force has four E-4Bs, which also shuttle the secretary of defence around the world.

Two were damaged June 16 at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska when a tornado whipped through the area with little advance warning.

"Two E-4B National Airborne Operations Center aircraft stationed at Offutt AFB received storm damage," Air Force spokesman Colonel Pat Ryder said.

'Mud people' festival celebrated in the Philippines

Aliaga

Filipino devotees muddied their faces and covered themselves with dried banana leaves yesterday to celebrate a religious festival which also has roots in Japan's occupation of the country during World War II.

The annual "Taong Putik" or "Mud People" festival, held in the town of Aliaga, 100 kilometres (60 miles) north of Manila, honours John the Baptist.

Hundreds of men, women and children walked to a muddy field at dawn and covered themselves from head to toe with mud and dried banana leaves, with some residents saying their appearance was meant to evoke the attire of John the Baptist in Biblical times.

According to the Bible, the prophet John donned clothes made

of camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey as he announced the coming of Jesus Christ.

The prophet, also honoured as a saint, is revered in largely Roman Catholic Philippines.

But the celebration, which concludes with a mass at Aliaga's Saint John the Baptist church, can also be traced back to Japan's wartime occupation of the former US colony in the 1940s.

Residents say Japanese soldiers ordered all the men from one of the villages in Aliaga to be executed outside a church.

As women and children prayed to John the Baptist, there was a heavy downpour that forced the troops to scamper, and prompted the grateful villagers to roll happily in the mud.



Devotees wear costumes made of banana leaves as they head to church to attend mass as part of a religious festival,