

2,000 TRAPPED

fighting rages in Philippine city



Philippine marines aboard their vehicles maneuver through a street on their way to an assault on the hide out of Muslim militants

Members of the police special forces maneuver as they assault Muslim militants' hide out near the city hall in Marawi

Marawi

Two thousand fearful civilians were trapped yesterday inside a southern Philippine city where troops are battling Islamist militants, authorities said, as the death toll from almost a week of fighting neared 100.

The military intensified a bombing campaign on parts of Marawi on Mindanao island, one of the biggest Muslim cities in the mainly Catholic nation, as it accused the gunmen of atrocities including murdering women and a child.

The initial fighting prompted 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 from terrorists linked to the Islamic State (IS) group.

Most of the city's 200,000 residents have fled because of the fighting, but 2,000 remain trapped in areas controlled by the militants, according to Zia Alonto Adiong, spokesman for the provincial crisis management committee.

"They have been sending us text messages, calling our hotline, requesting us to send rescue teams but we cannot simply go to areas which are inaccessible to us," Adiong said.

"They want to leave. They are afraid for their safety. Some

are running out of food to eat. They fear they will be hit by bullets, by airstrikes," he said.

The military announced on Saturday, the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, that it would step up the bombing.

"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," said military spokesman Brigadier-General Restituto Padilla.

"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."

The militants have killed at least 19 civilians, including three women and a child who were found dead near a university, regional military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jo-ar Herrera said.

"These are civilians, women. These terrorists are anti-people," Herrera said.

An AFP photographer saw eight bodies dumped off a bridge on the outskirts of Marawi on Sunday, with local residents identifying them as employees of a rice mill and a medical college.

It was unclear whether

those eight were included in the military's count of civilian deaths.

Fifteen soldiers, two policemen and 61 militants have died in the fighting, according to authorities. This brings the combined official death toll to at least 97.

IS flags

The violence began when dozens of gunmen went on a rampage throughout Marawi in response to an attempt by security forces to arrest Isnilon Hapilon, a veteran Filipino militant regarded as the local leader of IS.

The United States regards Hapilon as one of the world's

most dangerous terrorists and has offered a bounty of \$5 million for his capture.

The gunmen on Tuesday planted black IS flags, took a priest and up to 14 other people hostage from a church, and set fire to buildings. Authorities said Saturday the fate of those hostages remained unknown.

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

Duterte has said local criminals are also backing the Maute in Marawi. (AFP)

Sri Lanka steps up relief as toll exceeds 150

Colombo

Emergency teams rushed food and water yesterday to half a million Sri Lankans displaced by the island's worst flooding for more than a decade, as the death toll climbed to 151.

Government spokesman Rajitha Senaratne said relief operations had intensified following a break in the monsoon rains, with medical teams reinforcing hospitals in affected districts.

The official death toll had climbed to 151 with 111 people still listed as missing, Senaratne said. Another 95 were in hospital.

"Aid is now getting into the remotest areas which remained inaccessible in the

past two days," Senaratne told reporters, adding there were help lines people could call if they needed assistance.

Most victims were killed by landslides, not the flood waters, as their homes on hillsides were buried under torrents of mud and rock.

Nearly 2,000 houses were damaged or destroyed. Almost half a million people had been forced from their homes and were sheltering in government buildings or with friends and relatives.

The floods and landslides in the south and west of the island were the worst for 14 years.

Water levels in Ratnapura, Sri Lanka's gem district east of Colombo, had subsided



Sri Lankan residents making their way through floodwaters in Kaduwela

but many villages in Kalutara south of the capital were still under water, officials said.

Residents in the south of the island also face the threat of crocodile attacks after a

river known for its dangerous wildlife burst its banks overnight.

The charity Save the Children said about a tenth of those displaced were aged below five.

It raised fears of stagnant floodwater becoming breeding grounds for dengue-spreading mosquitos and noted that young children were more vulnerable. Medical teams were sent to the worst-hit areas to help prevent an outbreak of waterborne diseases.

"We have the expertise to deal with this situation," Senaratne said, adding cholera and diarrhoea had been successfully prevented in past floods. The government withdrew an evacuation order for thousands of residents in the southern district of Matara as water levels subsided.