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Country Report on Terrorism 2020 - Chapter 1 - Philippines

Overview: The Philippine government placed significant resources toward countering threats from terrorist groups that operate primarily in the country's South. A new antiterrorism law increased police and prosecutorial tools. Philippine military forces remained engaged in counterterrorism operations. The government enjoyed close counterterrorism cooperation with the United States that enhanced law enforcement and CVE efforts.

Groups affiliated with ISIS remained the deadliest terrorism threat in the Philippines. These groups continued to recruit, fundraise, and stage attacks on security forces and civilians alike, including suicide attacks that used female relatives of previous attackers. ISIS affiliates active in 2020 included elements of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Ansar al-Khalifa Philippines, and the Maute Group. The Philippines remained a destination for FTFs from Indonesia, Malaysia, and countries in the Middle East and Europe. The Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army (CPP/NPA) continued attacks on both security forces and civilians.

The government intensified actions against CPP/NPA through military operations and legal actions to cut off financing. The government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including strict travel regulations, limited the ability of terrorist groups to travel and conduct operations.

2020 Terrorist Incidents: Terrorist attacks using suicide bombings, IEDs, and small arms continued to target civilians and security forces.

On August 24, in Jolo, Sulu province, ASG killed more than a dozen people and injured more than 70 others in twin bombings. A female suicide bomber detonated a motorcycle bomb near a military truck next to a food market. An hour later, another female suicide bomber approached the area and detonated a bomb, likely targeting first responders.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: On July 3, President Duterte signed into law the Antiterrorism Act (ATA), replacing the 2007 Human Security Act. The Philippine government developed the ATA with assistance from the United States and other governments to criminalize predicate offenses, remove procedural obstacles to charging terrorists, and provide additional investigative tools to law enforcement. Opponents of the ATA, worried the law could be used against political rivals and human rights defenders, have petitioned the Supreme Court to invalidate the law as unconstitutional. According to human rights groups, government officials label activists and others as terrorists to silence criticism of the government or intimidate opponents in local disputes. Many such individuals are later killed or targeted with alleged politically motivated criminal charges.

The country's legal framework also includes antiterrorism financing laws. The government maintained a published list of groups designated as terrorist organizations that included ISIS affiliates and the CPP/NPA. Investments in personnel and training for the Philippine National Police Special Action Force and other specialized law enforcement units improved government capacity to detect, deter, and prevent terrorist acts. The government continued law enforcement and judicial responses to terrorism, disrupting plots and investigating and prosecuting terrorists. On September 28 a regional court convicted seven defendants for a 2016 terrorist bombing at a Davao City night market that killed 17, sentencing them to life imprisonment. Although ASG claimed responsibility for the attack and the perpetrators had links to ASG and the Maute group, prosecutors cited weaknesses in the Human Security Act and charged the seven instead with murder.

The government made progress toward implementing UNSCR 2396, taking steps to curb terrorist travel and improving information sharing with foreign partners. The Bureau of Immigration (BI) used deportation and exclusion authorities to remove several FTFs. Although the BI screened against domestic and international watchlists at select ports of entry, additional capacity is needed to collect passenger information data and extend access to INTERPOL databases at critical ports of entry beyond the Manila International Airport. The Philippines improved aviation security with enhanced screening technologies and training, strengthened oversight programs and information sharing, and through closer collaboration with foreign partners.

Government forces made several significant enforcement actions against terrorists and terrorist groups, including disruptions and arrests.

On October 10, Philippine authorities arrested four ASG members in Jolo, including one Indonesian: Rezky "Cici" Fantasya Rullie, the pregnant daughter of the couple responsible for the 2019 Jolo Cathedral bombing and widow of terrorist leader Andi Baso. Rullie reportedly was planning to give birth before committing her own suicide bombing. The law enforcement units involved in this and other terrorist disruptions benefited from U.S.-provided capacity-building assistance.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: The Philippines is a member of APG. Its FIU, the Anti-Money Laundering Council, is a member of the Egmont Group. The September APG Follow-Up Report to the 2019 Mutual Evaluation Report of the Philippines noted improvements in technical compliance since 2019 as well as continued vulnerabilities in light of the continued high terrorism-finance-risk profile and mature support networks that sustain terrorist groups in the Philippines. The September follow-up also indicated that multiple legislative amendments to the 2001 Anti-Money Laundering Act were introduced that would address some of the deficiencies identified by APG. The government has a domestic sanctions regime, and the new antiterrorism law automatically adopts the UN Security Council Consolidated List of designations, allowing the government to impose sanctions and freeze the assets of those designated. The Joint Terrorism Financial Investigations Group continued to work with the United States to investigate terrorism finance cases. For additional information on money laundering and financial crimes, see the *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Volume II, Money Laundering and Financial Crimes*.

Countering Violent Extremism: The government has a National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and developed and implemented CVE training for security forces and civil servants. Local governments, NGOs, and the private sector partnered on CVE programs. The Armed Forces of the Philippines worked with local stakeholders to encourage defections from the

ASG, BIFF, and the Maute Group and to rehabilitate former terrorist fighters. The government also supported strategic communications efforts to counter terrorist messaging. GCERF provides funds for local implementers across the Philippines for programs to prevent and counter violent extremism.

International and Regional Cooperation: The Philippines continued to support CT efforts in several regional and multilateral organizations, including the United Nations, ASEAN, ARF, ADMM, and APEC. The Philippine Navy continued joint patrols with its Indonesian and Malaysian counterparts under a June 2017 trilateral arrangement to combat piracy, terrorism, and the illegal drug trade.

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