EXECUTIVE POLICY BRIEF

The Surrender of Islamist Militants in Mindanao: Why they left the Abu Sayyaf, BIFF, and Dawlah Islamiyah

Najwa Indanan Uñga

23 March 2023
Issue Number 2023-02
EPB ISSN 2945-4689

INTRODUCTION

Since 2016, more than a thousand Islamist militants have voluntarily surrendered to government authorities in the southern Philippines. Crucially, they are from the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and Dawlah Islamiyah (DI) – Maute, Toraife, Hassan, and Maguid Groups. These violent extremist organizations (VEOs) – some of which are aligned with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – are notorious for terror attacks and criminal activities within and beyond the country's borders.

In light of recent developments, this Executive Policy Brief (EPB) aims to answer the question: why did members and supporters of the ASG, BIFF, and DI defect in Mindanao? Drawing primarily from official records and news articles since 2016, this paper identifies the factors that led Islamist militants to voluntarily disengage from violent extremism.

This is the first of a two-part EPB about Islamist militancy in the southern Philippines. By identifying why ASG, BIFF, and DI affiliates surrendered, this paper shall lay the foundation for its second part: an assessment of reintegration programs for rebel returnees.

WHY MILITANTS SURRENDER

The Abu Sayyaf was founded in 1991, but it was only in 2016 that its fighters voluntarily surrendered to the Philippine government. The then-commanding general of the Army's 1st Infantry Division described the incident as "rare": "it is normal for the NPA (New People's Army) to surrender, but this is different. We hope others would follow."[1] And they did. To date, there are more than a thousand surrendered ASG, BIFF, and DI members[2], and these are the factors that "push" Islamist militants away from violent extremism and "pull" them to a peaceful life[3].

LOSS OF LEADERS

Abu Sayyaf fighters defected for the first time in 2016. Then, the number of surrenderees surged the following year and reached its highest level thus far in 2018. Similarly, DI combatants started to lay down their arms in 2016. Then, there was an influx of returnees in 2018. The timing is suggestive: the high levels of surrenders coincide with the defeat of Islamic State affiliates in Marawi City in 2017. In particular, the military killed ASG leader Isnilon Hapilon, the then-*emir* of Islamic State-linked VEOs in the Philippines, as well as DI-MG leader Omar Maute, driving their followers to surrender from 2017 to 2018.[4]

What made leaderless insurgents give up their arms appears to have been personal difficulties resulting from the loss of leadership; these include exhaustion, fear, and starvation. For example, a follower of the late Basilan-based Abu Sayyaf leader Furuji Indama surrendered in 2022; he told the military that his life "became more miserable" and he feared for his safety after Indama was killed in a September 2020 encounter.[5] Similarly, a loyal follower of the slain Sulu-based ASG leader Majan Sahidjuan, alias Apo Mike, laid down his weapon in 2022; he said they had to keep moving and were often hungry and tired after Apo Mike died from a March 2021 encounter.[6]

Relatedly, fighters surrendered after being separated from their leaders. For instance, a follower of the late DI-MG leader Owayda Benito Marohombsar, alias Abu Dar, laid low after the latter was killed in a March 2019 encounter. However, he became active again under Faharudin Hadji Satar, alias Abu Zacharia, who succeeded Abu Dar. The military launched an operation against his group in March 2022, which made him lose contact with his comrades for about two weeks. Thinking they were all dead, and fearing for his life, he thus surrendered.[7]

Ultimately, the loss of leaders has contributed to defections in Mindanao. Leaderless militants often experienced burnout, fear, and hunger, prompting them to yield to government authorities. This may also help explain the pattern of mass desertions; that is, when leaders surrendered, their members often followed. This is exemplified by the case of ASG top leader Majid Said, alias Amah Patit, a sub-leader, and nineteen other followers in January 2023.[8] Perhaps the potential difficulties in life that may result from a leadership vacuum motivated the rank and file to also give up their arms.

BANGSAMORO PEACE PROCESS

Unlike ASG and DI militants who have been defecting as early as 2016, BIFF insurgents started to do so only in 2018; since then, the number of BIFF returnees has been increasing every year.[9] The timing is suggestive: BIFF defections coincide with the implementation of the peace agreements between the Philippine government and the erstwhile rebel group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) was signed in 2018, which paved the way for the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in early 2019. In 2022, the transition period for the BARMM was extended until 2025. Even though the ASG, BIFF, and DI are outside formal peace efforts, such milestones led members to surrender for at least three reasons.

First, the MILF – which has tens of thousands of fighters – has been collaborating with government authorities in pursuing VEOs. A former BIFF field commander reportedly said: "Life is so difficult now. Besides the military, forces of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front are also running after us."[10] Another returnee shared: "We were blinded by the false promises, and as BIFF members, it is as if everyone is hunting us down."[11] Exhausted from evading government and MILF forces, BIFF members thus surrendered.

Second, the MILF has been helping facilitate defections. Since the BIFF is a splinter group of the MILF, there are BIFF and MILF members who used to be brothers in arms. Being contacted by their former comrades in the MILF, as well as seeing them lead the Bangsamoro interim government, convinced some BIFF fighters to give up their arms[12]. Likewise, the MILF has been involved in negotiations for the surrender of ASG and DI militants in their areas; notable cases include the defection of a Basilan-based Abu Sayyaf sub-leader, along with his ten followers[13], and a DI-MG sub-leader in Lanao del Sur[14].

Third, the expansion of regional autonomy in Muslim Mindanao reduced the need for armed struggle. Two weeks after the BOL was signed, a BIFF commander surrendered with five of his men because they had "no more reasons to fight the government."[15] The creation of the BARMM also led to defections. For example, a BIFF commander, who had been an insurgent since 1972[16], surrendered with thirteen of his followers partly because "[t]he BARMM is in place."[17] Similarly, a former BIFF field commander, who was tired of fighting and hiding, shared: "Now we have BARMM[,] and we hope it will improve our lives."[18]

Ultimately, the Bangsamoro peace process has contributed to defections in the southern Philippines. However, it is just one of the many reasons why Islamist militants left VEOs. It also appears that the BARMM convinced mainly members of the BIFF – and not really the ASG and DI – to abandon the armed struggle. This can be partly explained by the fact that the BIFF is a breakaway faction of the MILF and its fighters have kinship ties to those of the latter. Indeed, after the BOL was signed, Mohagher Iqbal, the chair of the MILF peace panel, enjoined members "with blood relations" in the BIFF to encourage their relatives to embrace the BARMM.[19] Nonetheless, the BIFF, as well as the ASG and DI, remain outside formal peace negotiations. It has also been reported that there are former MILF insurgents who have joined the BIFF and DI-MG due to disillusionment with the BARMM.[20]

EXHAUSTION

Military operations have worn militants out. Among the earliest recorded cases is the surrender of an Abu Sayyaf sub-leader, who was a nephew of then-ASG leader Furuji Indama; he and ten other members laid down their weapons in October 2016, after a series of encounters in August, because they were tired of fighting and hiding.[21] Similarly, a BIFF brigade commander defected because of exhaustion; he was quoted as saying: "We are tired of running from helicopter attacks [and] artillery fires; we have no peace of mind."[22]

HUNGER

Insurgents left VEOs because they were starving. They had limited access to food for multiple reasons. First, government forces drove them out of their stronghold.[23] Second, continual military operations restricted their space and movement.[24] Third, their leaders

failed to provide for them.[25] Fourth, their supporters also defected. Not all surrenderees were combatants; some were tasked to supply fighters with food and other resources.[26]

FEAR

Militants surrendered because they were afraid of being arrested. A former BIFF member said: "We would like to be with our families without fear of being caught by government forces."[27] According to the military, the Martial Law declaration in Mindanao due to the Marawi Siege also led ASG members to surrender, "as soldiers can already knock at their doorstep without the necessary warrants."[28]

Defections also often occurred in the aftermath of focused military and law enforcement operations. For example, militants surrendered after troops seized the suspected lair of ASG leader Mundi Sawadjaan[29] and DI-MG leader Abu Zacharia[30]. Similarly, BIFF members in Sultan Kudarat defected a day after a sub-commander was killed in the same province.[31]

This pattern may be due in part to militants' fear of being next. A case-in-point is the surrender of BIFF members two weeks after the military destroyed their bomb-making facility in the Liguasan Delta; they feared that their group, which is based in the same area, might be targeted next, and they worried about their children who would be orphaned if they died.[32]

Fighters also laid down their arms after evading a military operation that was launched against them, such as two DI-MG members[33] and a BIFF sub-leader with eight of his followers[34]. Perhaps their defection was driven in part by the fear of not being able to escape next time.

UNMET EXPECTATIONS

Militants who joined VEOs for financial reasons surrendered when being in the group did not improve their socioeconomic situation.

This is exemplified by a returnee, who was quoted as saying: "The BIFF promised better lives that never happened, and now we just want to live peacefully with our families and loved ones."[35]

DISILLUSIONMENT WITH PERSONNEL

Leaders disappointed their followers for multiple reasons. First, they failed to provide financial support.[36] Second, they did not attend to their members' needs, such as food and other resources.[37] Third, they are not seen as a competent leader.[38] Fourth, they neglected their wounded and slain comrades.[39] Fifth, they allowed their men to harm innocent civilians, which pushed their other followers to quit.[40]

DISILLUSIONMENT WITH GROUP ACTIONS

Some members left because they were disillusioned with their comrades' behavior. Unlike Islamic State-aligned VEOs whose strategy involves attacking civilians, the BIFF mainly targets the Philippine armed forces.[41] Some members, however, abused civilians, which prompted others who disapproved of this action to leave.[42] The Abu Sayyaf, on the other hand, is notorious for beheadings; after the group decapitated two kidnap victims in 2016, an ASG member reportedly decided to leave.[43]

LOSS OF FAITH IN THE CAUSE

Religiously-motivated members defected when they no longer believed that the group's ideology was in accordance with Islam. For example, a former DI-MG member, who joined the group because he wanted to have a sin-free community, surrendered after realizing its ideology violated Islamic teachings.[44] Another DI-MG returnee also said that after Abu Dar died, no one taught members about doctrine anymore, which led him to realize that killing innocent civilians is against Islam.[45]

According to the military, an ex-Abu Sayyaf fighter joined the group "at a very young age because some of his relatives, who were also members of the ASG, claimed that what they are doing is for Jihad."[46] The returnee was quoted as saying: "I am thankful that my wife and in-laws urged me to leave the ASG. They asked me to attend a Madrasah, where I finally learned the real essence of being a Muslim."[47]

Apart from realizing that the group contradicts Islamic teachings, some insurgents also felt lost. For instance, a member of the BIFF-Karialan faction surrendered in 2020, saying:

"We are confused[,] and we do not know what we are fighting for anymore."[48] As previously noted, this may be related to the creation of the BARMM in 2019, which led some BIFF fighters to question the need for rebellion.

Others also found the struggle pointless. For example, an ex-Abu Sayyaf member shared: "I don't want to continue fighting. I see no relevance in killing each other since we are all Filipinos."[49] Another returnee, who was active in the ASG only for a year and a half, also said: "I decided to leave after realizing that we don't have a future, and I'll just waste my life if I will remain with the group."[50]

LOSS OF PUBLIC SUPPORT

Declining support from locals is among the reasons why insurgents defected.[51] Civilians have also been helping government authorities facilitate surrenders; these include parents[52], a professor[53], the town's Council of Elders[54], a concerned resident[55], and a doctor who caters to rebels' children[56].

FAMILY

It is not uncommon for VEOs in Southeast Asia to exploit family ties for terrorism.[57] What the trend of defections in Mindanao suggests is that the reverse is also true: one's family is a powerful motivation for leaving a life of violence behind. In the southern Philippines, Islamist militants gave up their arms out of longing, filial responsibility, and parental obligation.

After years, even decades, of being on the run, many insurgents simply wished to return home. For instance, a BIFF surrenderee shared: "I left when my daughter was still small [one year old], and now I have a grandchild with her after she got married. I just want to make up for the lost time with my wife and family."[58]

Militants also laid down their weapons for their parents. Examples include a DI member who surrendered to take care of his aging mother[59] and a mid-level ASG leader who defected after his mother suffered a stroke[60]. An Abu Sayyaf surrenderee also shared: "My parents cried a lot, so I thought I wouldn't go back (to ASG) because I felt sorry for them… They said there is no chance that we (ASG) can beat the government and it's leading us nowhere."[61]

Similarly, fighters who are also fathers gave up their arms for their children. For example, an Abu Sayyaf member surrendered after his wife got arrested in order to be with their two sons – a three-year-old and a five-month-old baby.[62] Likewise, a BIFF unit head defected because while he was hiding from the Army in the Liguasan Marsh, his 10-year-old son called, asking him why he was not around when he needed his presence the most in school.[63]

Returnees also lamented the consequences of their militancy on their loved ones. Ahmed (not his real name) shared that because they had to keep moving, his five children were born in different places. This led him to persuade his father, who was a top and trusted commander of the BIFF's late founder, to surrender. They both did. According to Ahmed, "[my father's] desire to see me and my children finish our studies prevailed."[64]

RIDO SETTLEMENT

Many militants joined the ASG or BIFF for protection against their enemies. After the rido (family feud) was resolved, they then laid down their arms. A case-in-point is the surrender of a BIFF commander and five of his men, which came after the military mediated and settled their dispute with the family of a leader of an armed farmers' group.[65]

It appears that the loss of a rival also makes militants more likely to give up their weapons. For example, a former government soldier and his relatives joined the Abu Sayyaf because of a conflict with the clan of an MILF commander. The military encouraged them to surrender in October 2014, but negotiations only became positive after the death of the MILF commander and the then-regional government's settlement of warring clans in November 2015. Thereafter, they laid down their arms in January 2016.[66]

Rido settlement thus encourages defections. As of February 2023, the BARMM Ministry of Public Order and Safety has already resolved 191 cases. However, family feuds remain and still erupt into violence, necessitating continued coordination among the regional government,

local government units, law enforcement agencies, religious and traditional leaders, local mediators, and other stakeholders.

The cases above also point to the relationship between defections and other issues in Mindanao, which includes not only the settlement of rido, but also the normalization of former MILF combatants, disbandment of private armed groups (PAGs), and elimination of loose firearms. It has been noted elsewhere that ex-MILF fighters and PAGs do not want to voluntarily disarm because of the presence of ISIS affiliates in their area. The converse is also arguably true: ASG, BIFF, and DI members hesitate to surrender when the people around them are armed.

Civilians often carry arms when they do not feel safe and secure. Sometimes, their fear for their safety leads them into thinking that only VEOs can protect them. In order to clear their name and receive reintegration assistance, Islamist militants are required to turn over their weapons; barring their inclusion in security forces, they also cannot bear arms again.[67] In a region where peace remains fragile, giving up one's guns may feel like giving up a means for self-defense. Indeed, it has been reported that some ASG fighters opt to surrender to the MNLF instead of the military in order to keep their firearms.[68] Thus, encouraging defections necessitates addressing other sources of conflict and violence in Mindanao.

Relatedly, surrenderees are at risk from their previous group. The most vulnerable to reprisal attacks are those involved in the campaign against violent extremism by convincing their former comrades to surrender and/or serving as informants. Indeed, more than twenty BIFF members were allegedly executed from April to May 2018 alone because they were suspected of engaging in backchannel talks and divulging information about the group's movements.[69] In this regard, former insurgents may need the assistance of security forces.

TRUST IN THE ARMED FORCES OF THE PHILIPPINES

It may be stating the obvious, but Islamist militants, as well as some locals, distrust the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). A BIFF returnee shared: "We were repeatedly told [that] the government will not help us and that the Army will kill us on sight."[70] A former ASG member also said: "I was told by my father before that we will be killed once we approach the soldiers. But here I am[,] now having a nice conversation with them and the mayor."[71]

Seeing troops behave in ways contrary to their expectations has resulted in defections. A notable example is the surrender of a BIFF child warrior an hour after the military installed electricity in their area; he was quoted as saying: "Bearing solar-powered flashlights and lamp posts, soldiers came to the village of my relatives to help them. I realized that they were not interested in killing us all."[72]

When locals vouch for members of the armed forces, it also encourages fighters to surrender. For instance, two Maute combatants, including a minor, wanted to defect, but they feared that the troops in their area would hurt them; locals reassured them otherwise, which convinced the pair to give up their arms.[73]

The military's humane treatment of ASG returnees also led to the defection of a wanted Abu Sayyaf member.[74] Exercising restraint, however, may take a toll on soldiers, especially those whose comrades – with whom they shared strong bonds – died in clashes with extremists; this highlights the continuing need for mental health and psycho-social support for members of the armed forces. [75]

Ultimately, trust in the AFP has contributed to defections in the southern Philippines. Lack of coordination among security forces, however, may erode this hard-earned trust.

In 2019, the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) approached the Philippine National Police (PNP)'s Special Action Force (SAF) for a raid on the houses of Aljan Mande and two civilian militias in Basilan; this was not coordinated with the military.[76] The joint NBI and SAF operation killed Aljan and his brother Jamsid, former Abu Sayyaf members who already surrendered in 2018, as well as Radjak Ammah, a leader of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the village.[77]

The military, local government officials, and civil society organizations decried the failure to coordinate. The then-spokesperson of the

Western Mindanao Command said that the victims "supported the military's campaign in convincing more Abu Sayyaf bandits to return to the fold of the law."[78] The then-chief of the Command also stated: "We don't want a repeat of Mamasapano."[79] In 2015, SAF launched an operation to capture top terrorist Zulkifli bin Hir, alias Marwan, in Mamasapano, Maguindanao, without prior coordination with the military and MILF.[80] This resulted in 44 SAF, 17 MILF, and 5 civilian casualties.[81]

Local chief executives in Basilan added that the slay of the Mande brothers sowed fear among those who already surrendered and those who wanted to surrender.[82] A peace worker interviewed for this paper said the reasoning went: "why surrender if you will still be killed even if you do?"

The raid also affected how locals perceived authorities. A source in Basilan said that in the aftermath, residents, especially those who lived in the outskirts of the province, thought that "the government has not changed" and "duplicity is still the name of the game."

Incidents like this may also negatively affect the reintegration of surrenderees. Locals, especially those who were victims of VEOs, are often reluctant to accept former militants in their community. They are afraid, even angry, because of the latter's violent past. Operations against returnees add to their fear and anger: due to the presence of former insurgents in their area, something bad might happen again. Security operations may also harm civilians, adding to their feeling of being unsafe.[83]

Finally, a source in Sulu alleged that there are other cases that were not reported, such as a former Abu Sayyaf member who was supposedly cleared by the AFP but shot by SAF. The point cannot be stressed enough: security forces must coordinate to prevent unnecessary suffering and maintain public trust in government authorities.

IMPROVED SERVICE DELIVERY

Militants left VEOs for greener pastures. This is exemplified by an erstwhile ASG commander, who was quoted as saying: "Life is becoming more and more difficult in the hills. We envy people in the lowlands whose lives are improving now as a result of government services now reaching them. There are roads, bridges, schools and barangay health centers now in areas we once ruled."[84]

DESIRE TO LIVE A NORMAL LIFE

Militants surrendered upon realizing that it is not the life that they wanted for themselves.[85] Many also expressed their wish to go back to the past. A former sub-leader of the DI-Maguid Group was quoted as saying: "I have been sleepless for days lately thinking about my family and the normal life I once enjoyed. I feared that I might be a casualty of a lost cause… Suddenly, I just wanted to become a farmer and be with my family again."[86]

However, surrendering is only the first step in their return to normalcy. After their defection, they have to transition into civilian life, which includes having to find and keep a job. This is hard, especially after years, even decades, of militancy. Hence, ex-fighters need the support of government authorities and community partners in going back into circulation.[87]

DESIRE TO CLEAR THEIR NAME

Some militants defected to be exonerated. For example, an ASG returnee told a journalist: "I went into hiding, but I am tired of being hunted down even if my only mistake was to be a supporter… I need to clear my name[,] so I surrendered with my Garand." [88]

Being cleared by the security forces is just the first step, however. Victims can still file cases against them, which has resulted in the arrest of surrenderees.[89] There is also a stigma attached to being affiliated with a VEO, especially one that has harmed – and continues to harm – local communities.[90]

AGING

There are Islamist militants who have been in the armed struggle for decades, and old age has driven some of them to surrender. For example, a 63-year-old ASG member, who had been in the group since the time of its late founder Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, defected after two decades of militancy; he was

quoted as saying: “I am old, my knees are too weak to run in the forest.”[91] To note, Janjalani was killed in 1998. That said, it appears that only a few returnees are in their late adulthood. Most are young or middle-aged. In fact, there are many child warriors who surrendered and are in particular need of mental health and psychosocial support.

REINTEGRATION ASSISTANCE

Many militants surrendered in order to avail of financial, livelihood, housing, and other forms of assistance from the government. The first regional reintegration program was launched in 2018[92], and local government units have been providing various means of support since 2016. However, there was a surge in surrenders from all three VEOs in 2020, and the number has been increasing every year.

The high levels of defections since 2020 may be explained in part by then-President Rodrigo Roa Duterte’s signing of Administrative Order (AO) 25 on 18 March 2020, which made former violent extremists eligible for the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP).[93] AO 25 amended AO 10, which entitled only former communist rebels to reintegration assistance.[94] Under the E-CLIP grant, surrendered Islamist militants may also receive cash and livelihood assistance, as well as firearms remuneration, among other benefits.[95] Indeed, two days after AO 25 was signed, BIFF members defected, saying: “The government’s offer is good under President Rodrigo Duterte[,] so we grabbed the opportunity to surrender while he is still in office.”[96]

As more former insurgents benefit from reintegration programs, more members also defect. As a BIFF returnee explained: “We envy them [their surrendered comrades] – they are now happy with their families[,] and they are now earning through the livelihood given by the government.”[97]

However, the implementation of reintegration programs has engendered frustration in some surrenderees. Delays in the provision of his benefits reportedly drove an ex-ASG member to run amok inside an Army detachment, killing a soldier and two civilians.[98] Disparities in surrender packages also pose a problem. In practice, local government units, the regional government, the military, and civil society organizations have their own initiatives for former insurgents. As a result, returnees receive varying levels and kinds of assistance, causing feelings of envy and dissatisfaction.[99]

Reintegration programs for surrendered Islamist militants are also not universally accepted. There are locals, especially victims and affected communities, who feel that the government is rewarding those who fought against them, while deprioritizing those who bore the brunt of violent extremism.[100] This may foster resentment at surrenderees and negatively affect their reintegration into society.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the factors that led ASG, BIFF, and DI militants to surrender, the Department of National Defense, as well as the broader defense and security sector, may consider the following measures:

Sustain the military pressure on VEOs. It appears that exhaustion, fear, and starvation due to focused military and law enforcement operations pushed many militants to defect.

Continue the strategy of leadership decapitation and negotiations with ranking militants. After leaders were arrested or killed, followers often went into hiding and later surrendered. Likewise, when leaders defected, many of their members also followed.

Maintain collaboration between the military and the MILF. The involvement of the MILF in negotiating surrenders, as well as monitoring the Islamic State-aligned groups in their areas, has strengthened the campaign against violent extremism in the Bangsamoro.

Enhance Civil-Military Operations of the AFP. With greater public trust in the AFP, civilians have been helping security forces facilitate defections by linking militants who want to surrender to the military, as well as reassuring them of humane treatment by authorities. The peace workers interviewed for this paper also highlighted the importance of strengthening efforts aimed at educating soldiers on how to engage with the local

population, especially children, in a manner that is respectful of their culture and traditions.

Improve coordination among security forces. Coordination lapses may result in loss of life and setbacks in the campaign against violent extremism.

Sustain interagency initiatives to settle rido, eliminate loose firearms, and disband PAGs. Many militants join VEOs for protection against their enemies, and encouraging them to give up their weapons requires addressing other sources of violence in Mindanao.

Improve the implementation of government reintegration programs. It is necessary to harmonize existing initiatives and lessen delays in the provision of benefits in order to reduce dissatisfaction among surrenderees. A peace worker interviewed for this paper also stressed the need to provide adequate mental health and psychosocial support to former militants, especially child warriors, their families, and members of the armed forces.

Improve service delivery in Mindanao. The gains of the Bangsamoro peace process, in particular, must be felt at the community level. Socioeconomic development may persuade militants to defect, increase public trust in government authorities, dissuade the local population from sympathizing with VEOs, and stem the flow of new recruits.

Ensure that victims, internally displaced persons, and affected communities receive adequate and timely assistance. This helps dispel the notion that government authorities are prioritizing former violent extremists.

Conceptualize initiatives aimed at healing and reconciliation. Such efforts contribute to the reintegration of surrenderees into mainstream society. However, a peace worker interviewed for this paper noted that these must be community-led and not forced upon the local population, especially those who were victimized by VEOs.

CONCLUSION

Voluntary disengagement from violent extremism is a complex phenomenon, and in the southern Philippines, there are multiple factors that drove ASG, BIFF, and DI fighters to give up their arms after years, even decades, of militancy. Moving forward, more attention is needed on how reintegration programs are being implemented, as well as how reengagement and recidivism may be prevented. These will be discussed in the second part of this Executive Policy Brief.

ENDNOTES

[1] Roel Pareño, “7 Abu Sayyaf members surrender in Basilan,” *Philippine Star*, January 21, 2016, https://www.philstar.com/nation/2016/01/21/1544911/7-abu-sayyaf-members-surrender-basilan.
[2] Online interview with a military source on March 3, 2023.
[3] In categorizing militants’ reasons for leaving, the author drew on Mary Beth Altier, Christian N Thoroughgood, and John G Horgan, “Turning away from terrorism: Lessons from psychology, sociology, and criminology,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 5 (September 2014): 647-661, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24557447.
[4] Online interview with a military source on March 3, 2023.
[5] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "ASG 'bandit' surrenders in Basilan," *Philippine News Agency*, September 8, 2022, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1183243.
[6] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "2 notorious ASG bandits yield in Sulu," *Philippine News Agency*, June 17, 2022, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1176947.
[7] Western Mindanao Command, "Fearing for his life, Daulah Islamiyah member yields in Marawi," *Kalinaw News - Philippine Army News*, March 16, 2022, https://www.kalinawnews.com/fearing-for-his-life-daulah-islamiyah-member-yields-in-marawi/.
[8] Frencie Carreon, "21 Abu Sayyaf members yield in Sulu – military," *MindaNews*, January 9, 2023, https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2023/01/21-abu-sayyaf-members-yield-in-sulu-military/.
[9] Online interview with a military source on March 3, 2023.
[10] John Unson, "Officials anticipating surrender of more BIFF militants soon," *Notre Dame Broadcasting Corporation*, May 12, 2018, https://ndbcnews.com.ph/news/officials-anticipating-surrender-more-biff-militants-soon.
[11] Edwin Fernandez, "Maguindanao guv urges BIFF to yield, live normal lives," *Philippine News Agency*, December 16, 2019, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1088847.
[12] Ferdinandh B. Cabrera, "From warrior to musician: The story of Ahmed," *MindaNews*, January 6, 2023, https://www.mindanews.com/feature/2023/01/from-warrior-to-musician-the-story-of-ahmed.
[13] Roel Pareño and John Unson, "Abu Sayyaf sub-leader, 10 followers surrender in Basilan," *Philippine Star*, March 31, 2022, https://www.philstar.com/nation/2022/03/31/2171067/abu-sayyaf-sub-leader-10-followers-surrender-basilan.
[14] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., “Dawlah Islamiya leader surrenders in Lanao Sur,” *Philippine News Agency*, March 16, 2022, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1169871.
[15] Ferdinandh B. Cabrera, "Bangsamoro organic law softens BIFF rebels to yield," *MindaNews*, August 10, 2018, https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2018/08/bangsamoro-organic-law-softens-biff-rebels-to-yield.

[16] The BIFF was founded in 2010, but it is a breakaway faction of the MILF, which was formed in 1977. The MILF, in turn, is a splinter group of the MNLF, which was created in 1972.
[17] Edwin Fernandez, “BIFF leader, 13 others yield to Army’s 33IB in Maguindanao,” *Philippine News Agency*, September 8, 2019, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1079871.
[18] Edwin Fernandez, “16 BIFF members yield to Army in Maguindanao,” *Philippine News Agency*, January 26, 2020, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1091958.
[19] Cabrera, "Bangsamoro organic law softens BIFF rebels to yield."
[20] “Addressing Islamist Militancy in the Southern Philippines,” *International Crisis Group*, March 18, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/philippines/addressing-islamist-militancy-southern-philippines.
[21] Roel Pareño, "11 Abu bandits surrender," *Philippine S*tar, October 25, 2016, https://www.philstar.com/nation/2016/10/25/1636428/11-abu-bandits-surrender.
[22] Edwin O. Fernandez, "4 IS-linked BIFF leaders surrender to Army," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, December 20, 2019, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1203881/4-is-linked-biff-leaders-surrender-to-army.
[23] "Two subleaders and 13 other ASG bandits surrender to Alakdan Division," *Kalinaw News - Philippine Army News*, December 11, 2020, https://www.kalinawnews.com/two-subleaders-and-13-other-asg-bandits-surrender-to-alakdan-division/. Terrorism analyst Kenneth Yeo also discussed the link between territorial defeat and surrenders in “Hungry and tired: the decline of militancy in Mindanao,” *The Strategist*, June 11, 2021, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/hungry-and-tired-the-decline-of-militancy-in-mindanao/.
[24] Edwin O. Fernandez, "12 Islamic State-linked gunmen surrender to Army," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 15, 2020, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1213408/12-islamic-state-linked-gunmen-surrender-to-army.
[25] Edwin Fernandez, "BIFF field commander, 5 followers yield in Maguindanao," *Philippine News Agency*, November 25, 2021, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1160877.
[26] Online interview with a military source on March 3, 2023.
[27] Edwin Fernandez, "3 BIFF yield to BARMM police," *Philippine News Agency*, November 17, 2020, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1122030.
[28] Roel Pareño, “7 Abu Sayyaf surrender to troops in Basilan, Tawi-Tawi,” *Philippine Star*, May 28, 2017, https://www.philstar.com/nation/2017/05/28/1704437/7-abu-sayyaf-surrender-troops-basilan-tawi-tawi.
[29] Anna Felicia Bajo, “8 ASG members under Mundi Sawadjaan surrender -military,” *GMA News Online*, September 23, 2020, https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/regions/756921/8-asg-members-under-mundi-sawadjaan-surrender-military.
[30] “30 Dawlah Islamiyah supporters surrender in Lanao,” *Sun Star*, March 8, 2022, https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/1923021/zamboanga/local-news/30-dawlah-islamiyah-supporters-surrender-in-lanao.
[31] Edwin Fernandez, “5 BIFF members yield, denounce extremism,” *Philippine News Agency*, February 20, 2023, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1195665.
[32] John Unson, "3 BIFF members surrender to military in Maguindanao," *Philippine Star*, June 23, 2018, https://www.philstar.com/nation/2018/06/23/1827211/3-biff-members-surrender-military-maguindanao.
[33] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "2 Maute members, 5 supporters yield in Lanao del Sur," *Philippine News Agency*, August 9, 2019, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1044339.
[34] Noel Punzalan, "BIFF leader, 8 others surrender in Maguindanao," *Philippine News Agency*, October 26, 2018, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1052240.
[35] Edwin Fernandez, "29 Moro extremists yield in Central Mindanao," *Philippine News Agency*, September 26, 2022, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1184597.
[36] Edwin Fernandez, "12 more BIFF extremists yield in Maguindanao," *Philippine News Agency*, August 31, 2021, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1152078.
[37] Fernandez, "BIFF field commander, 5 followers yield in Maguindanao."
[38] Team Tabak, "Due to Incompetent Leader, a DI-MG member surrenders with his Rifle to 51st IB in Lanao del Sur," *1st Infantry (TABAK) Division Philippine Army*, April 13, 2021, https://1id.army.ph/2021/04/13/due-to-incompetent-leader-a-di-mg-member-surrenders-with-his-rifle-to-51st-ib-in-lanao-del-sur.
[39] Joy Cantos, "2 Abu Sayyaf sumuko," *Philippine Star*, March 1, 2019, https://www.philstar.com/pilipino-star-ngayon/probinsiya/2019/03/01/1897604/2-abu-sayyaf-sumuko.
[40] Roel Pareño and John Unson, "17 BIFF, Abu Sayyaf bandits surrender," *Philippine Star*, May 11, 2018, https://www.philstar.com/nation/2018/05/11/1814078/17-biff-abu-sayyaf-bandits-surrender.
[41] International Crisis Group, “Addressing Islamist Militancy in the Southern Philippines.”
[42] Pareño and Unson, “17 BIFF, Abu Sayyaf bandits surrender.”
[43] Ellie Aben, "‘Fight was leading us nowhere’: former Abu Sayyaf militants speak after surrender to Philippines forces," *Arab News*, March 25, 2022, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2050411/world.
[44] "Former Maute group members surrender to authorities," *ABS-CBN News*, February 19, 2019, https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/02/19/19/former-maute-group-members-surrender-to-authorities.
[45] Team Tabak, "Due to Incompetent Leader, a DI-MG member surrenders with his Rifle to 51st IB in Lanao del Sur."
[46] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "5 Abu Sayyaf bandits surrender in Sulu," *Philippine News Agency*, March 13, 2021, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1133514.
[47] Garcia, "5 Abu Sayyaf bandits surrender in Sulu."
[48] Noel Punzalan, "2 more BIFF combatants yield in Maguindanao," *Philippine News Agency*, October 12, 2020, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1118193.
[49] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "13 ASG bandits surrender in Sulu," *Philippine News Agency*, November 17, 2021, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1160087.
[50] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "9 more ASG members yield to live peacefully with loved ones," *Philippine News Agency*, March 24, 2022, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1170557.
[51] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "6 ASG bandits surrender in Sulu," *Philippine News Agency*, July 26, 2019, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1076143.
[52] John Unson, "2 minor Maute militants surrender in Cotabato," *Philippine Star*, December 25, 2018, https://www.philstar.com/nation/2018/12/25/1879680/2-minor-maute-militants-surrender-cotabato.
[53] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "2 Dawlah Islamiya supporters yield in Lanao," *Philippine News Agency*, November 25, 2020, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1122924.
[54] Edwin Fernandez, "14 BIFF rebels yield to Army in NoCot," *Philippine News Agency*, February 15, 2022, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1167813.
[55] Frencie Carreon, "Abu Sayyaf member surrenders in Sulu," *MindaNews*, February 27, 2018, https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2018/02/abu-sayyaf-member-surrenders-sulu.

[56] Martin San Diego, "The doctor healing the wounds of war in Basilan," *Rappler*, June 14, 2020, https://www.rappler.com/nation/263758-basilan-doctor-healing-wounds-of-war.
[57] Amalina Binte Abdul Nasir and Kenneth Yeo Yaoren, "How Southeast Asian Terror Networks Exploit Family Ties," *The Defense Post*, October 8, 2020, https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/10/08/southeast-asia-terror-families.
[58] Edwin Fernandez, "11 BIFF combatants yield, reunite with families," *Philippine News Agency*, February 7, 2021, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1129893.
[59] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "Dawlah Islamiya member surrenders in Lanao Sur," *Philippine News Agency*, October 2, 2020, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1117284.
[60] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "2 ASG leaders, 13 followers yield in Sulu," *Philippine News Agency*, December 12, 2020, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1124565.
[61] Ellie Aben, "'Fight was leading us nowhere.'"
[62] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "7 Abu Sayyaf bandits surrender in Sulu," *Philippine News Agency*, March 4, 2021, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1132501.
[63] "Surrender of BIFF men shows family outweighs terror," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 25, 2018, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1003766/surrender-of-biff-men-shows-family-outweighs-terror.
[64] Cabrera, "From warrior to musician: The story of Ahmed."
[65] Edwin Fernandez, "6 BIFF men yield to Army after family feud settlement," *Philippine News Agency*, October 11, 2018, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1050728.
[66] Julie S. Alipala, "Abu Sayyaf man who surrendered to AFP was a gov't soldier, says rido drove him to banditry," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 21, 2016. https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/757704/abu-sayyaf-man-who-surrendered-to-afp-was-a-govt-soldier-says-rido-drove-him-to-banditry. Pareño, "7 Abu Sayyaf members surrender in Basilan."
[67] Online interview with a military source on March 3, 2023.
[68] International Crisis Group, "Addressing Islamist Militancy in the Southern Philippines."
[69] Unson, "3 BIFF members surrender to military in Maguindanao."
[70] Edwin Fernandez, "NoCot guv welcomes 3 BIFF surrenderers," *Philippine News Agency*, September 23, 2021, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1154430.
[71] Garcia, "13 ASG bandits surrender in Sulu."
[72] Noel Punzalan, "BIFF child warrior surrenders," *Philippine News Agency*, January 28, 2019, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1060205.
[73] "Maute-IS Remnant surrenders amidst Intensified Military Operations," *Kalinaw News - Philippine Army News*, January 25, 2019, https://www.kalinawnews.com/maute-is-remnant-surrenders-amidst-intensified-military-operations.
[74] "Four Abu Sayyaf members surrender in Sulu, says military," *GMA News Online*, November 22, 2020, https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/regions/765123/four-abu-sayyaf-members-surrender-in-sulu-says-military/story.
[75] Online interview with a Cagayan de Oro-based peace worker on March 8, 2023.
[76] Cathrine Gonzales, "PNP says nothing irregular in 'uncoordinated' raid in Basilan," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 6, 2019, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1150888/pnp-says-nothing-irregular-in-uncoordinated-raid-in-basilan.
[77] Julie S. Alipala, "Wesmincom chief after killing of ex-Sayyaf men in police, NBI raid: Remember Mamasapano," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 8, 2019, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1151966/wesmincom-chief-after-killing-of-ex-sayyaf-men-in-police-nbi-raid-remember-mamasapano.
[78] Julie S. Alipala, "Military, Basilan execs seek reason for slays of 3 'assets'", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 3, 2019, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1149691/military-basilan-execs-seek-reason-for-slays-of-3-assets.
[79] Alipala, "Wesmincom chief after killing of ex-Sayyaf men in police, NBI raid."
[80] Rappler.com, "TIMELINE: Mamasapano clash," *Rappler*, February 7, 2015, https://www.rappler.com/nation/82827-timeline-mamasapano-clash.
[81] Bong S. Sarmiento, "6 years on, MILF maintains Mamasapano carnage due to PNP-SAF's lack of coordination," *MindaNews*, January 25, 2021, https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2021/01/6-years-on-milf-maintains-mamasapano-carnage-due-to-pnp-safs-lack-of-coordination.
[82] Alipala, "Wesmincom chief after killing of ex-Sayyaf men in police, NBI raid."
[83] Online interview with a Cagayan de Oro-based peace worker, who has staff members in Basilan, on March 8, 2023.
[84] John Unson, "10 Abu Sayyaf members surrender to Army in Basilan," *Philippine Star*, June 9, 2018. https://www.philstar.com/nation/2018/06/09/1823068/10-abu-sayyaf-members-surrender-army-basilan.
[85] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "3 Abu Sayyaf members surrender in Basilan," *Philippine News Agency*, July 3, 2018, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1040253.
[86] Noel Punzalan, "Dawlah Islamiya subleader surrenders for 'normal life'," *Philippine News Agency*, June 3, 2021, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1142435.
[87] Online interview with a Cagayan de Oro-based peace worker on March 8, 2023.
[88] Julie Alipala, "More Abu Sayyaf members surrender," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, December 17, 2018, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1063794/more-abu-sayyaf-members-surrender.
[89] Online interview with a military source on March 3, 2023.
[90] Online interview with a Cagayan de Oro-based peace worker on March 8, 2023.
[91] Alipala, "More Abu Sayyaf members surrender."
[92] Teofilo Garcia, Jr., "ARMM launches program vs. violent extremism," *Philippine News Agency*, April 17, 2018, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1032269.
[93] Ruth Abbey Gita-Carlos, "Ex-violent extremists now covered by E-CLIP," *Philippine News Agency*, March 19, 2020, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1097198.
[94] Gita-Carlos, "Ex-violent extremists now covered by E-CLIP."
[95] Gita-Carlos, "Ex-violent extremists now covered by E-CLIP."
[96] Edwin Fernandez, "3 BIFF fighters yield to Army in NoCot," *Philippine News Agency*, March 21, 2020, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1097361.
[97] Edwin Fernandez, "Army welcomes 6 BIFF surrenderers in Maguindanao," *Philippine News Agency*, April 14, 2020, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1099772.
[98] Julie S. Alipala, "3 dead as ex-Abu Sayyaf man ran amok inside Army detachment; suspect killed – police," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, October 13, 2022, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1679561/3-dead-as-ex-abu-sayyaf-went-amok-inside-army-detachment-suspect-killed.
[99] Online interview with a Cagayan de Oro-based peace worker, who has staff members in Basilan, on March 8, 2023.
[100] Online interview with a Basilan-based peace worker on February 28, 2023.

NDCP Executive Policy Brief

The Executive Policy Brief (EPB) is a publication series on national defense and security issues by the Research and Special Studies Division (RSSD) of the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP). The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NDCP. The readers are free to reproduce copies mechanically, or to quote any part provided proper citations are made.

Author

Ms Najwa Indanan Uñga is a Defense Research Officer I at the Research and Special Studies Division (RSSD) of the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP). Her current research interests include the Bangsamoro peace process, voluntary defections, and reintegration programs in the southern Philippines. She may be reached through email at najwa.unga@ndcp.edu.ph.

NDCP Editorial Board

Please scan the QR code to access our Feedback Form for your comments, opinions, and suggestions. Thank you very much and we look forward to hear from you.

www.ndcp.edu.ph