

THE MAUTE BROTHERS: SOUTHEAST ASIA'S 'TIME BOMB'

MARAWI CITY, Philippines: On his Facebook profile page Omorkhayam Romato Maute describes himself as a "Walking Time-Bomb". When a band of militants led by Omorkhayam and one of his brothers over-ran a town in the southern Philippines on May 23, festooning its alleyways with the black banners of Islamic State, the Facebook description seemed appropriate. Governments across Southeast Asia had been bracing for the time when Islamic State, on a back foot in Iraq and Syria, would look to establish a 'caliphate' in Southeast Asia and become a terrifying threat to the region.

"The Middle East seems a long way away but it is not. This is a problem which is amidst us," Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told Australian radio on Saturday as the battle to re-take Marawi neared the end of the third week, with a death toll of nearly 200. "It is a clear and present danger."

Omorkhayam and Abdullah Maute grew up with several other brothers and sisters in Marawi, a Muslim-majority town in a country where over 90 percent of the population is Christian. Marawi is, historically, the center of Islam on Mindanao, a sprawling island where violent resistance to authority has been a tradition since the era of Spanish colonialism, spurred in recent decades by poverty and the neglect of successive governments.



MARAWI, Philippines: A man rides his motorcycle past shuttered shop fronts sprayed with pro-Islamic State group graffiti yesterday. — AFP

As teenagers in the 1990s, the brothers seemed like ordinary young men, said a neighbor of the Maute family: They studied English and the Holy

Quran, and played basketball in the streets. "We still wonder why they fell to the Islamic State," said the neighbor, who was once an Islamist militant himself

and surrendered to the government. "They are good people, religious. When someone gets to memorize the Koran, it's unlikely for them to do wrong. But this is what happened to the brothers."

In the early 2000s, Omorkhayam and Abdullah studied in Egypt and Jordan, respectively, where they became fluent in Arabic. Omorkhayam went to Al-Azhar University in Cairo, where he met the daughter of a conservative Indonesian Islamic cleric. After they married, the couple returned to Indonesia. There, Omorkhayam taught at his father-in-law's school, and in 2011 he settled back in Mindanao.

It may have been then, and not when he was in the Middle East, that Omorkhayam was radicalized. In Cairo "none of his fellow students saw him as having any radical tendencies at all, and photographs show a young man enchanted by his baby daughters and playing with the growing family by the Red Sea," Jakarta-based anti-terrorism expert Sidney Jones wrote in a 2016 report. Little is known about Abdullah's life after he went to Jordan, and it is not clear when he returned to Lanao del Sur, the Mindanao province that includes Marawi. Intelligence sources said there are seven brothers and one half-brother in the family, all but one of whom joined the battle for Marawi. — Reuters



MARAWI, Philippines: Local government employees cry as Lano Del Sur Vice Governor Mamintal Adiong (not seen) gives a speech in the provincial capital on the southern island of Mindanao yesterday. — AFP

PHILIPPINES FLAG RAISED ON I-DAY IN WAR-TORN MARAWI

BLASTS ROCK BESIEGED CITY

MARAWI, Philippines: Filipinos marked their country's Independence Day by raising the national flag yesterday in a southern city where troops pressed assaults to quell a three-week siege by Islamic State group-aligned militants that has left 270 combatants and civilians dead. Many were teary-eyed during the flag-raising ceremonies at the heavily guarded city hall and provincial capital building in Marawi, the heartland of the Islamic faith in the country's south, where hundreds of gunmen went on a deadly rampage on May 23.

Blasts from airstrikes thudded in the distance during the events. While the flag-raising was mainly to mark Independence Day, it also symbolized the reclaiming of city hall and other areas of Marawi by government forces. Policemen roamed a community that troops had wrested back from the militants and festooned abandoned houses with small flags.

Marawi Mayor Majul Gandamra fought back tears as he thanked troops, police and volunteers in the crisis that has turned parts of the previously tranquil lakeside city of more than 200,000 people, most of whom have fled the fighting, into a smoldering battlefield. Villager Janisah Ampao, who fled her home with her husband and two children when the fighting broke out last month, felt a sense of relief and pride when she saw the flag being raised at the provincial capital building. She has been living with other evacuees in a nearby government

building that has been turned into an emergency shelter.

"I don't know how we can re-start our lives after the fighting," Ampao said by telephone. "Our city is in ruins, all the people have gone and the stores are closed. I saw on TV that our village has been destroyed." Facing the worst crisis in his yearlong presidency, President Rodrigo Duterte canceled an annual Independence Day diplomatic reception at the presidential palace and skipped a flag-raising ceremony in Manila.

"He doesn't feel like giving a toast, even symbolic, when soldiers are dying and the evacuees and the displaced are in the provinces and in Marawi's margins," Foreign Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano told reporters. Philippine flags were also flown at half-staff as the country mourned the killings of 13 marines in a fierce battle in Marawi on Friday. Some of the marines perished in a fire ignited by the militants at the height of the fighting, military officials said. They said 58 soldiers and policemen, 191 militants and 21 civilians have been killed in the three weeks of clashes.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson conveyed independence greetings on behalf of President Donald Trump and the American people, saying the US stands as an ally with the Philippines as it confronts the attacks in Marawi and other terrorist threats. The US military has deployed a spy plane at Manila's request to help provide surveillance to troops battling militants still holed up in

a few buildings in Marawi with an unspecified number of civilian hostages. The tough-talking Duterte took an adversarial stance toward former US President Barack Obama, who had criticized his bloody anti-drug crackdown, but his relations with Trump have been markedly better.

The Marawi siege unfolded after a May 23 army raid failed to capture a top terror suspect, Isnilon Hapilon, who has been designated by the Islamic State group as its leader in Southeast Asia. The raid pre-empted a plot by about 500 gunmen waving Islamic State group-style black flags to capture all of Marawi and kill as many Christians as they could, military officials say. Duterte told reporters Sunday that he decided to declare martial law in the southern third of the country to better stop the gunmen from escaping from Marawi or launching new attacks elsewhere.

While he has warned before that the Islamic State group has gained a foothold in the country's south, Duterte said he was still surprised by the magnitude of the violence in Marawi, adding that he has been told that Islamic State group leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was behind the Marawi attack. "I did not realize that it was that bad because now it appears that Baghdadi himself, the leader of the ISIS, has specifically ordered terroristic activities here in the Philippines," Duterte said, without elaborating. ISIS is an abbreviation for the Islamic State group. — AP

MOON SEEKS JAPAN PATIENCE IN RESOLVING 'PAST HISTORY'

SEOUL: South Korean President Moon Jae-in said yesterday ties with Japan are being blocked by historical issues that will take time to resolve and he asked for Japan's understanding and cooperation on the issue. Moon's comments were an apparent reference to Korean "comfort women", a Japanese euphemism for women forced to work in the Japanese military's wartime brothels. The issue of the women has plagued bilateral ties between the neighbors for decades.

Moon told the visiting secretary general of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party that the people of South Korea did not accept a deal reached by his conservative predecessor and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2015 to resolve the issue. But Moon, in his talks with Toshihiro Nikai, apparently did not directly address whether he would seek to renegotiate the agreement, in which Japan made an apology to the women, who are now elderly, and promised about one billion yen (\$9.07 million) for a fund to help them.

The two governments agreed under the deal that the issue would be "irreversibly resolved" if both sides fulfilled their obligations. "Both South Korea and Japan should look at this issue directly and understanding is needed that it will take more time (to resolve it)," Moon told Nikai, the South's presidential office said. Moon, who suggested during his successful campaign for a May 9 election that he could try to renegotiate the deal, also said the two countries should not "cling to past history" only to block other developments in their ties.

Moon stressed the importance of cooperation with Japan in efforts to denuclearize

North Korea, which has been ramping up weapons tests since last year in defiance of global sanctions. Nikai said he agreed with Moon and hoped the two countries could move forward together, the South's presidential office said. The meeting came hours after the South's foreign ministry warned Japan to exercise caution when making remarks about bilateral ties, including the issue of the women, following reported comments by Nikai in a meeting with South Korean lawmakers.

'Trivial Matters'

During the meeting, Nikai said "those plotting schemes" to block bilateral ties from moving forward should be "eradicated", several Japanese and South Korean media reported. "I don't know if in South Korea there are even a handful, but they must be eradicated," Nikai was quoted as saying. He also expressed hope that the two countries would "get along well" and not to have relations tangled with "trivial matters".

Nikai's office at the Liberal Democratic Party could not confirm his reported comments, which appeared not to include any direct reference to the women who were forced to work in Japanese brothels. But he came under fire from South Korean civic groups for what appeared to be criticism of people who support scrapping the 2015 agreement. "Comments related to relations between South Korea and Japan, including those regarding the comfort women issue, should be made with care," a South Korean foreign ministry official said, in response to Nikai's reported comments. The official declined to be identified citing sensitivity of the issue. — Reuters



SEOUL: South Korean President Moon Jae-in shakes hands with Toshihiro Nikai, Secretary General of the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party, during their meeting at the Presidential Blue House yesterday. — AFP

SINGAPORE DETAINS FIRST EXTREMIST WOMAN CITIZEN

SINGAPORE: Singapore said yesterday it has detained an assistant child-care worker suspected of trying to join Islamic State and to find a militant husband in Syria, and was holding her under a tough security law that allows for detention without trial. The detention of the first Singaporean woman for suspected Islamist radicalism comes as concern is growing about the spread of Islamic State in the region. Singapore and its neighbors recently began intelligence cooperation aimed at stemming the movement of militants across their borders.

Singapore has reiterated over the past year that it is a target of Islamist groups and has urged the public to be alert. The suspect, Syaikhah Izzah Zahrah Al Ansari, 22, was detained this month for intending to make her way to Syria to join Islamic State of Iraq and Syria with her child, the Ministry of Home Affairs said in a statement. "She supported ISIS' use of violence to establish and defend its self-declared 'caliphate', and aspired to live in it," the ministry said, referring to Islamic State.

Izzah, a contract assistant at an infant care center, was radicalized as early as 2013 by online propaganda with links to Islamic State and she shared pro-Islamic State material on social media. She had

also sought a militant husband in Syria, the ministry said, adding that her family had tried to talk her out of her plans but had not handed her in, and had even destroyed evidence against her. "She said that since 2015, she was looking for a Salafi or an ISIS supporter" to marry and settle down with him and her child in Syria, the ministry said.

"She said she would support her husband if he fought for ISIS in Syria as she believed she would reap 'heavenly rewards' if he died in battle. With her 'elevated status' as a martyr's widow, she felt she could easily marry another ISIS fighter in Syria." Her parents, both Quranic teachers, and sister came to know of her radical postings in 2015. After she was placed under investigation, important evidence was destroyed by a family member relating to her plans to join Islamic State, in order to try to cover up her acts, it said.

"They tried on their own to dissuade her but they were unsuccessful. Izzah continued down the path of radicalism. In April 2017, she boasted to a contact that the Singapore authorities had not detected her," the ministry said. It made no mention of any legal action against any of her relatives. — Reuters

CHINA PLANE MAKES EMERGENCY LANDING

SYDNEY: A China Eastern passenger plane has made an emergency landing in Sydney after a huge hole appeared in one of its engine casings and forced it to turn back just after taking off. Terrified passengers described a very loud noise soon after flight MU736 left Sydney Airport for Shanghai at 8.30pm (1030 GMT) on Sunday. Crew cleared seats near the affected engine and turned the flight back. No one aboard the twin-engine Airbus A330 was injured.

China Eastern said the crew found damage in the casing of the air inlet in the left engine. "The crew... decided to return to Sydney Airport immediately," an airline spokeswoman added in an emailed statement to AFP. "The returned aircraft is currently under investigation at Sydney Airport." Images posted on social media showed a large hole ripped in the casing. An unidentified passenger told broadcaster Channel Seven: "We, like, went up in the air and

all of a sudden, I heard like 'z-z-z-z-z' and it was really, really loud. It kind of smelled like burning. "Oh, I was scared. Yes. I was really scared. Our group was terrified." Another passenger told Channel Nine that "the wing to my left just started making a massive amount of noise and they cleared all of the seats".

Panel detached?

AirlineRatings.com editor Geoffrey Thomas said investigators would be looking at whether the acoustic panelling of the engine had become detached, citing a similar incident in mid-May involving an Egypt Air A330. He said the panel might have come back and been sucked into the engine. Thomas said an Airbus airworthiness directive issued in 2011 and updated in 2014 noted that some operators had found acoustic panelling in the cowling area was disbonding.

"It was a problem that they knew about and airlines had been warned and had been required to inspect their engines and if necessary replace the panels," he added. "Whoever is looking after the maintenance of the engines, whether it is the airline or the engine maker, it's their responsibility." He said the China Eastern incident was unusual and the serious damage to the engine meant it was likely to be replaced. — AFP



SYDNEY: A China Eastern Airbus A330 passenger aircraft, which suffered a serious fault to its starboard engine following take-off, sits on the tarmac at Sydney Airport yesterday. — AFP