



international
alert
PHILIPPINES

COVID and Conflict Dynamics in the Bangsamoro

March 2021

Photo courtesy of Early Response Network - Marogong, Lanao del Sur

Summary

The government responded to the growing COVID-19 crisis in early 2020 with a series of lockdowns with varying rules and coverage. In the Bangsamoro, the government at various levels enforced the lockdowns through curfews, checkpoints, roving patrols, and quarantine or travel passes. These were similar to the measures used to enforce martial law in Mindanao from May 2017 to December 2019, which succeeded in lowering the number of violent conflict incidents over the three-year period. They had the same effect of reducing conflicts in the region in general in 2020. However, the data also showed that these measures caused a rise in tensions and ignited

cases of violence between enforcers and citizens. Extremist violence dropped in the March-May period, coinciding with the strictest lockdowns, but persisted with incidents up by 5% by the end of 2020 from the previous year. The lockdowns had the biggest impact on the household, with gender-based violence and child abuses increasing particularly in the March-May period. This makes the case for making the government's COVID-19 response sensitive to the vulnerabilities of women and children, providing avenues for reporting, designating emergency shelters, and guaranteeing quick action on complaints.

Introduction

A heavy cloud of fear hung over the Bangsamoro in March 2020, as a Luzon-wide lockdown in the north prompted the southern region's five provinces and the cities of Cotabato and Isabela to do the same to try and prevent the spread of COVID-19 in their areas. Lanao del Sur and Tawi-Tawi imposed an 'enhanced community quarantine', the strictest level of lockdown. (See [Table 1](#)). Meanwhile Maguindanao, Sulu and Isabela City followed a 'general community quarantine' that prohibited face-to-face school learning, imposed strong social distancing measures, but still allowed people to go to work.

The government sought to limit the movement of people and social and economic activities in varying degrees. While the national government set the lockdown level of a locality, the local government units could appeal and change this decision based on their appreciation of prevailing conditions.

Measures to enforce the lockdowns included curfews, checkpoints, roving patrols, and the use of travel or quarantine passes to control the number of people who could go outside their homes. The government also ordered the wearing of masks and face shields, physical distancing, and hand washing. With people forced to stay at home, the national government provided aid to poor families through a Social Amelioration Program while local governments distributed relief packages.

The lockdowns would generally abate in the Bangsamoro by June 2020, when the region shifted to a 'modified general community quarantine'. However, Lanao del Sur would return in September to a stricter 'modified enhanced community quarantine' because of a spike in cases before slipping into a 'general community quarantine' in November. (See [Table 1](#) and [Figure 1](#))

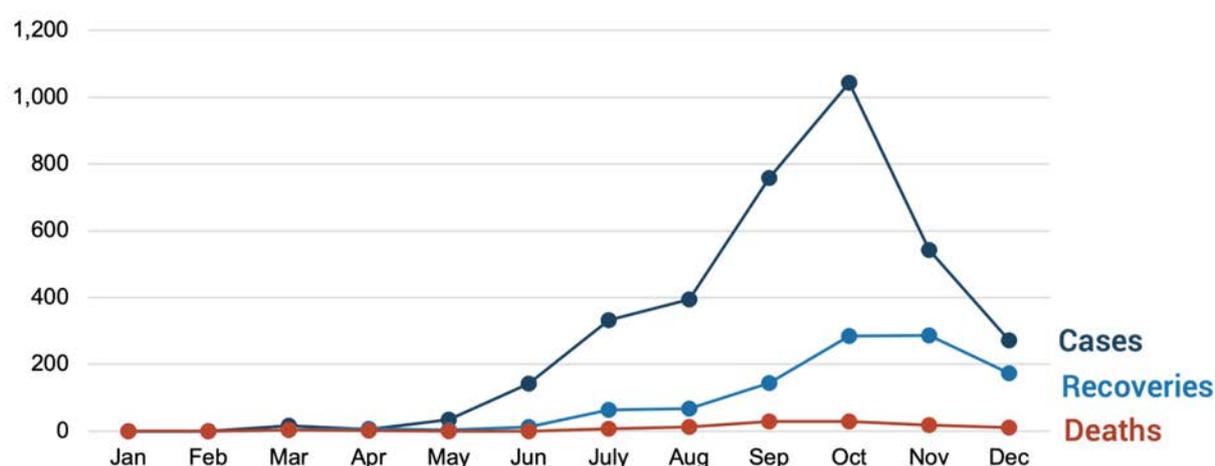
Table 1. Lockdown levels of BARMM provinces and the cities of Cotabato and Isabela, 2020

	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December		
Basilan	CQ	GCQ	GCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	GCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ		
Lanao del Sur	ECQ	ECQ	ECQ	GCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MECQ	MECQ	GCQ	GCQ
Maguindanao	GCQ	GCQ	GCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	
Sulu	GCQ	GCQ	GCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	
Tawi-Tawi	ECQ	ECQ	GCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	
Cotabato City	CQ	ECQ	GCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	
Isabela City	GCQ	GCQ	GCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	MGCQ	

Notes:

- CQ - Initial lockdown level before this was differentiated into four
- ECQ - Strict lockdown, people were confined to their homes
- MECQ - People allowed to buy essential items or avail themselves of essential services
- GCQ - People allowed to go to work
- MGCQ - Almost normal, except that mask- and face-shield wearing and physical distancing were required

Figure 1. Number of COVID-19 cases, recoveries and deaths, BARMM and Isabela City, 2020



Source: DOH Data Drop Case information as of March 26, 2021

COVID-19 Tracking Methodology

International Alert Philippines began to receive COVID-19 related reports in February 2020 through a network of 'early responders' or individuals who monitor community-level tensions and violent conflicts and who could enable and coordinate a timely and context-specific response that can avert violence or prevent its escalation. The reports were in text-message format and were received and documented in a Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) established by Alert.

Data from the CEMS were thereafter incorporated into the dataset of Conflict Alert, though separately to distinguish its more real-time nature. Meanwhile, conflict data for the year 2020 were added to the Conflict Alert database, which completed a 10-year panel dataset on violence in the Bangsamoro provinces and the cities of Cotabato and Isabela.

COVID-19-related incidents were subjected to analysis, specifically as to the specific cause or causes of the tensions or violence. Since CEMS and Conflict Alert used different units of analysis, each produced a different set of data. CEMS analyzed the reports from the early responders while Conflict Alert scrutinized the incidents of violent conflict.

The process yielded important quantitative data to support a qualitative analysis of violent conflict. The use of the two monitoring systems strengthened the analysis of how COVID-19 impacted the Bangsamoro region in terms of conflict. CEMS provided the narratives that in many cases were missing from police reports, while Conflict Alert gave quantifiable observations.

Results

A. Violence surrounding multi-stakeholder responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

The curfews, checkpoints, and patrols that the government used to enforce the lockdowns were essentially those used to impose martial law in Mindanao at the start of the siege of Marawi City on 23 May 2017 and up to 31 December 2019. Not surprisingly, they had the same effect as martial law had in reducing violent conflict. Based on Conflict Alert's tally, there were 2,323 incidents in 2020, 13% less than in 2019.¹ The year 2020 was the fourth straight year that incidents had fallen.

However, behind the lower annual count were evidence pointing to how the government's response to the COVID-19 crisis had acted as triggers to tensions and violence, especially in the first three months. The lockdowns were imposed strictly and swiftly, such that individuals, families, and businesses – and even local governments – didn't have time to prepare for them.

Tensions arose from the tightening of resources and the consequent competition for access to those valuable resources when the pandemic struck. These tensions arose especially over the issue of the national and local governments' relief assistance or the lack of it. CEMS reports also indicated the frequent use of physical force to round up curfew violators while heated exchanges and the intimidating use of weapons at checkpoints added pressure. Individuals were fined or detained over their failure to wear masks and face shields or for clustering in groups. Local governments sealed their borders, igniting conflicts with other local governments that needed access to food, water, fuel, and other supplies.²

Conflict Alert data bolstered these observations. Of the total number of incidents in 2020, 117 were conflicts directly related to the government's COVID-19 response, of which 70% took place in the March-May period alone. (See **Figure 2**). These incidents stemmed from the enforcement of lockdown



Military personnel man a checkpoint to restrict movement of people at the height of the lockdown in March 2020. Photo courtesy of Mhay Hassan

¹ 2020 figures are preliminary.

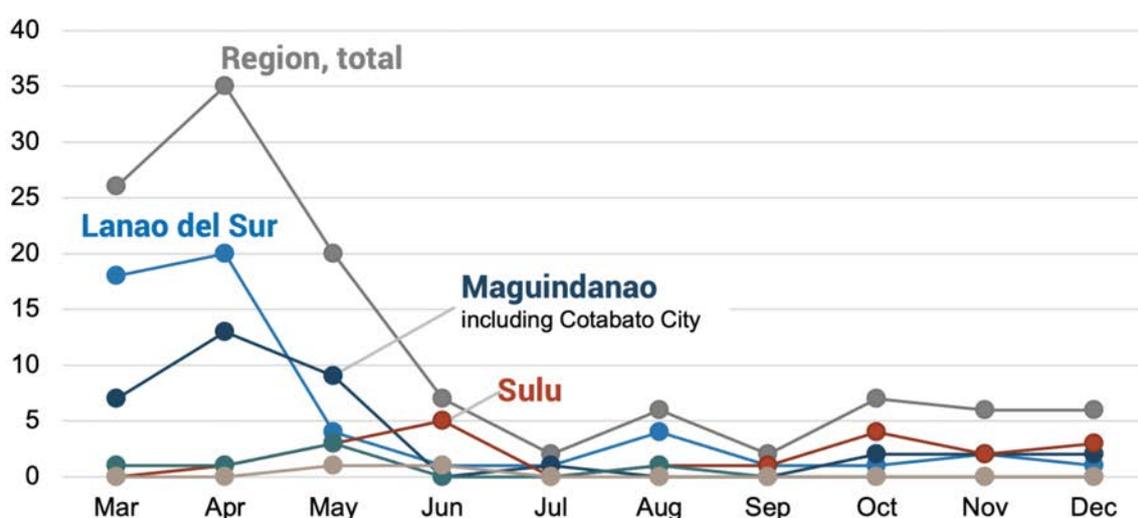
² Read Alert's full analysis in *Special Bulletin on COVID-19 and Conflict*, <https://conflicalert.info/cems-bulletins2019/special-cems-bulletin-on-covid-19-and-conflict-1-february-17-april-2020/>

rules and health protocols that pitted the enforcers – the Philippine National Police, barangay officials, and in a few instances, the military – against local residents. Most conflicts were due to violations of curfew hours and of health protocols. In most cases, they served as the sole conflict triggers, but in other instances, they paired together or combined with other triggers. For example, curfew violators, in groups without masks or face shields, were also found to have violated a liquor ban or engaged in illegal gambling. Meanwhile, checkpoints became sites of violent confrontations as passersby were checked for travel passes, which then led to

inspections that in some cases yielded illegal drugs and loose firearms.

From March to December, a total of 288 civilians, including youths, were arrested by the police. Nearly half were from Lanao del Sur, which had imposed the strictest lockdowns, and tallied the highest number of incidents among all Bangsamoro provinces. Maguindanao (including Cotabato City) and Sulu posted the second and third highest number of arrests respectively, while Basilan (including Isabela City) and Tawi-Tawi combined for 29 arrests, consistent with the low number of incidents in these provinces.

Figure 2. Conflicts triggered by COVID-19 restrictions and protocols, BARMM and Isabela



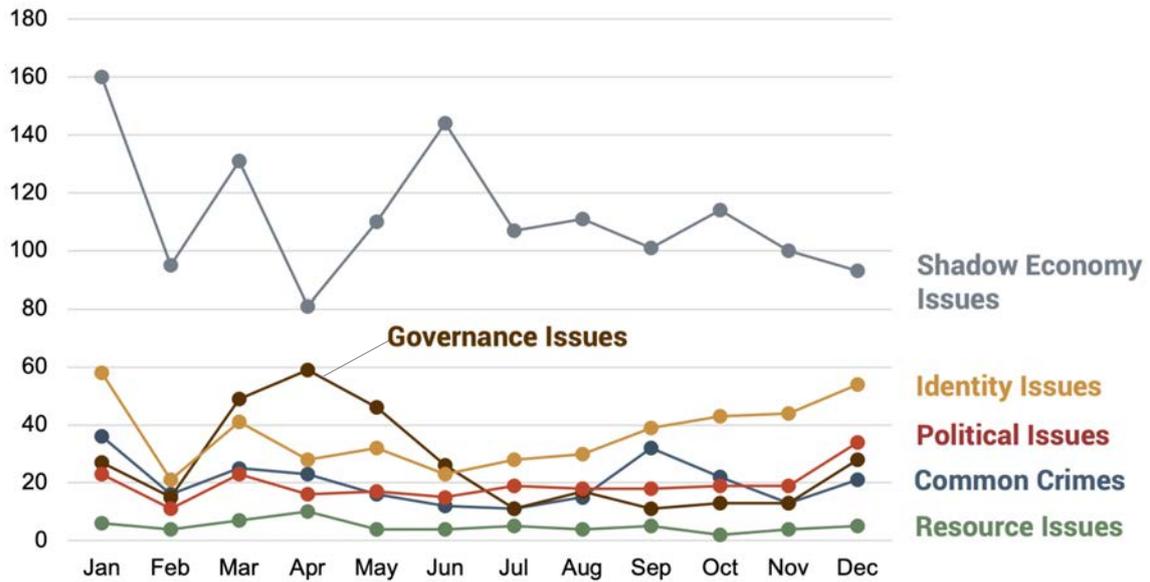
Source: Conflict Alert

B. COVID-19's impact on conflict dynamics in the Bangsamoro

The Conflict Alert database categorized the causes of COVID-related violent incidents as governance issues as they stemmed from the enforcement of government policies and decisions. In 2020, incidents due to governance issues noticeably increased in March after a dip in February, stayed high

in April and May, then fell in the following months before rising slightly in December. (See [Figure 3](#)). The increase in incidents in the March-May period was principally due to COVID-related incidents. During this time, the lockdowns had acted to subdue the other conflict causes, except for shadow economy issues, but even these fell in April.

Figure 3. Conflict incidents by main causes, BARMM and Isabela City, 2020



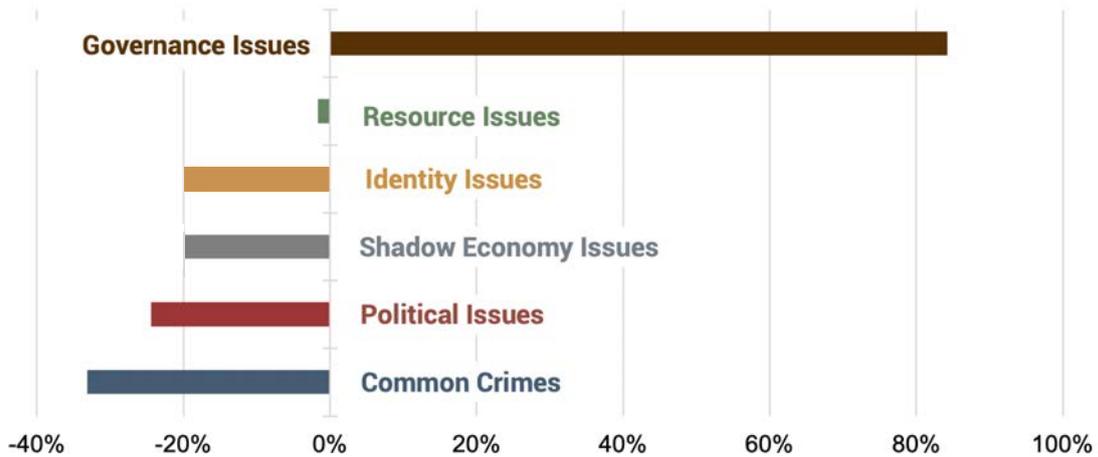
Source: Conflict Alert

A year-on-year comparison per causal category provided a starker view of the impact of the government's COVID-19 response on violence in the Bangsamoro. **Figure 4** shows that the number of incidents due to

governance issues increased by 84% in 2020 compared to the year before, while those due to other causes dropped.

The next sections discuss these causal categories in turn.

Figure 4. Rate of change of conflict incidents by main causes, BARMM and Isabela City, 2019-2020

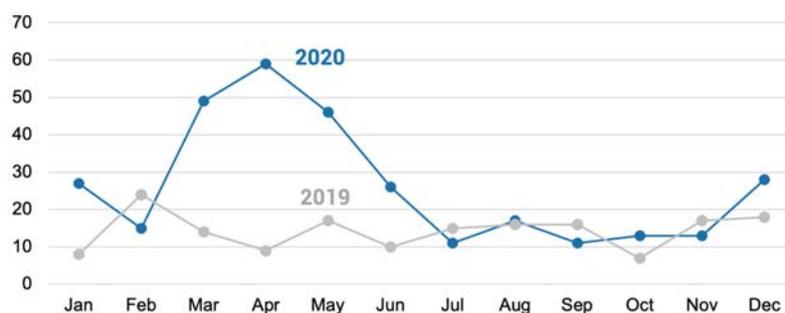


Source: Conflict Alert

B.1. Governance issues

The increase in the number of governance-related incidents came during the March-May period (as mentioned above), which extended up to June. (See [Figure 5](#)). If the COVID-related incidents were excluded from the count, the number of governance issues would have risen by only 7% in 2020 from the previous year.

Figure 5. Governance issues, BARMM and Isabela City, 2019-2020

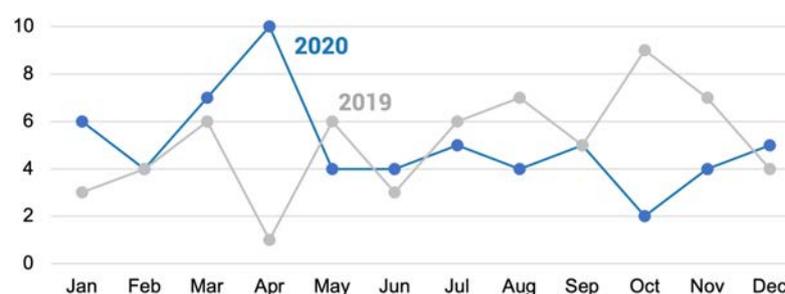


Source: Conflict Alert

B.2. Resource issues

Incidents due to resource issues increased in March and April (see [Figure 6](#)) but their total by the end of 2020 was 2% less than in 2019. Incidents during these months, when increases were registered, consisted of arrests for illegally-cut lumber usually in Lanao del Sur and for illegal fishing particularly in Sulu and Basilan. On the other hand, the number of land conflicts fell to just three in the March-May period after six in the same months in 2019, and to a total of 19 in 2020 from 27 in the previous year. Less land conflicts meant less triggers for clan feuds (see next section).

Figure 6. Resource issues, BARMM and Isabela City, 2019-2020

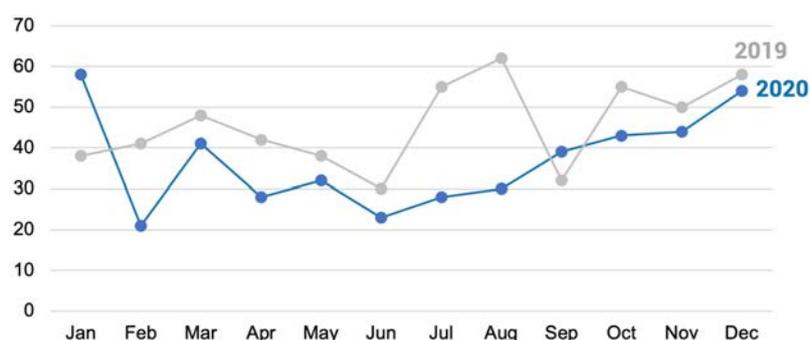


Source: Conflict Alert

B.3. Identity Issues

Incidents due to identity issues fell by 20% in 2020 as clan feuds shrank by 54%. Violent incidents triggered by personal grudges also fell by 40%. Clan feuds, often precipitated by personal

Figure 7. Identity issues, BARMM and Isabela City, 2019-2020



Source: Conflict Alert

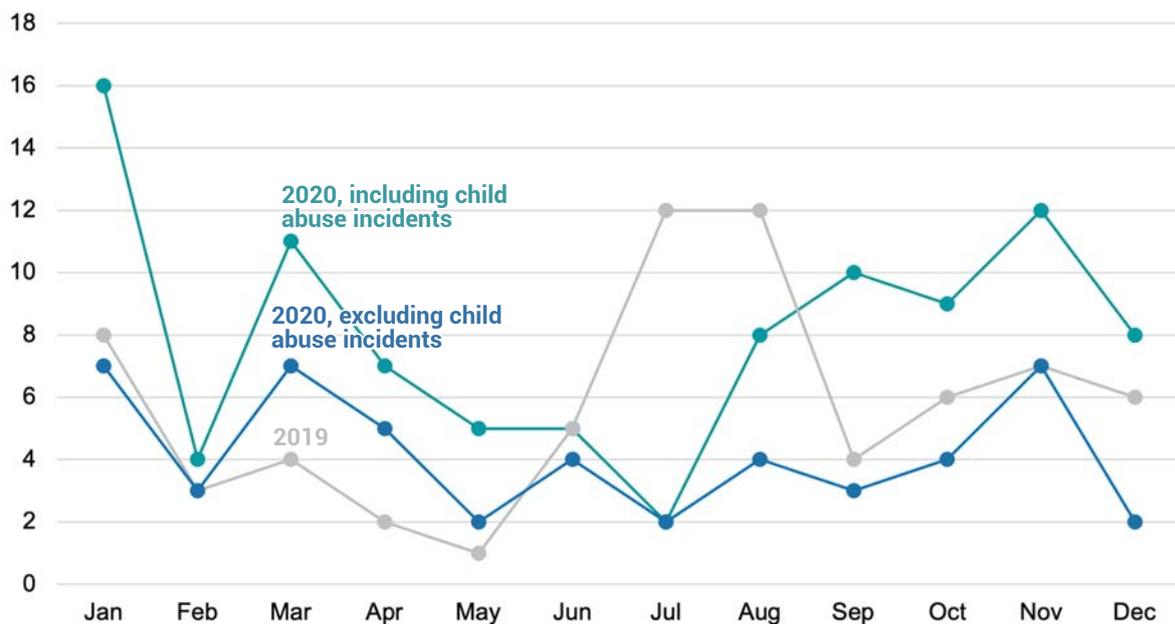
grudges – as well as by land conflicts and political rivalries, among others – were a major driver of conflict, deaths, and displacement in the Bangsamoro in 2019. Interviews with local residents through the Multi-Stakeholder Validation Groups, a component of Conflict Alert methodology, indicated that families and clans were focused on surviving the lockdowns rather than on retaliating against one another for past grievances. The reduction in clan feuding became manifest beginning March 2020.

Meanwhile, gender-related violent incidents numbered almost as many in 2020 (97) as in 2019 (96). Unpacking these incidents showed that 52% involved adults and the rest, girl children. The latter incidents are labeled in the Conflict Alert database, following a practice of accounting for the multiple causes of violent incidents, as both gender-related issues and child abuse cases, and are discussed further in the section on common crimes (on page 11), under which child abuse cases are classified.

Gender-related violent incidents, including those that involved girl children, rose in the March-May and September-December periods in 2020. (See **Figure 8**). If cases involving children were excluded, the number of gender-related violent incidents would fall to 50 in 2020 from 70 in 2019 but with higher numbers recorded in March up to May compared to the same months in 2019. The March-May period coincided with strict lockdowns in the Bangsamoro provinces and Isabela City. (Refer to **Table 1**).

Analyzing incidents by actors, in particular the victims, provides a way to determine how they were similarly or differently affected by the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both women and girls became additionally vulnerable to abuse, but based on the available data, girls even more.

Figure 8. Gender-related issues, BARMM and Isabela City, 2019-2020

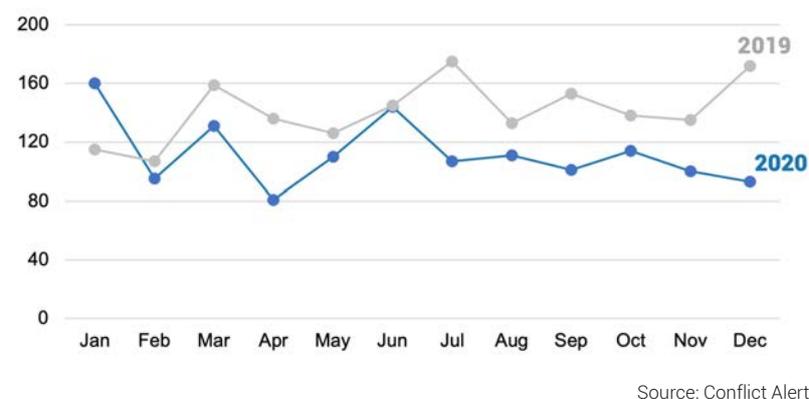


Source: Conflict Alert

B.4. Shadow economy issues

Conflicts due to shadow economy issues, the foremost driver of violence in the Bangsamoro, fell by 20% in 2020 compared to 2019, with incidents attributed to the top shadow economy issues, illegal drugs and illicit weapons, decreasing respectively by 17% and 24%. The number of motorcycle and motor vehicle carjackings (also considered as common crimes, see section on these incidents on page 11) fell by 55%.

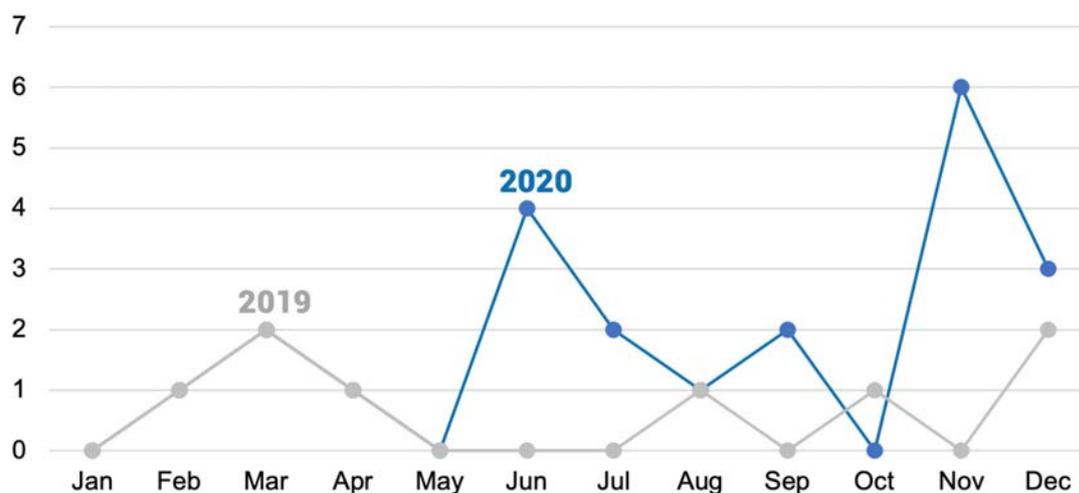
Figure 9. Shadow economy issues, BARMM and Isabela City, 2019-2020



On the other hand, smuggling, particularly of cigarettes (recorded in Conflict Alert as cross-border trade activities), increased to 22 incidents in 2020 from just eight in 2019, with 11 incidents taking place in Lanao del Sur, eight in Maguindanao, two in Sulu, and one in Tawi-Tawi. Incidents, mostly apprehension of suspects by state authorities and confiscation of goods, occurred at looser times during the lockdown period. (See **Figure 10**). Local manufacturers in Luzon had reduced output

during the lockdowns and distribution chains had been disrupted, which encouraged the illicit trade of cigarettes in other parts of the country, particularly Mindanao.³ Reporters for CEMS, who noted that the illicit trade continues, said the cigarettes come from Malaysia or Indonesia, pass through the Bangsamoro's island provinces, before these are distributed to different parts of Mindanao, including the Bangsamoro.

Figure 10. Cross-border trade, BARMM and Isabela City, 2019-2020



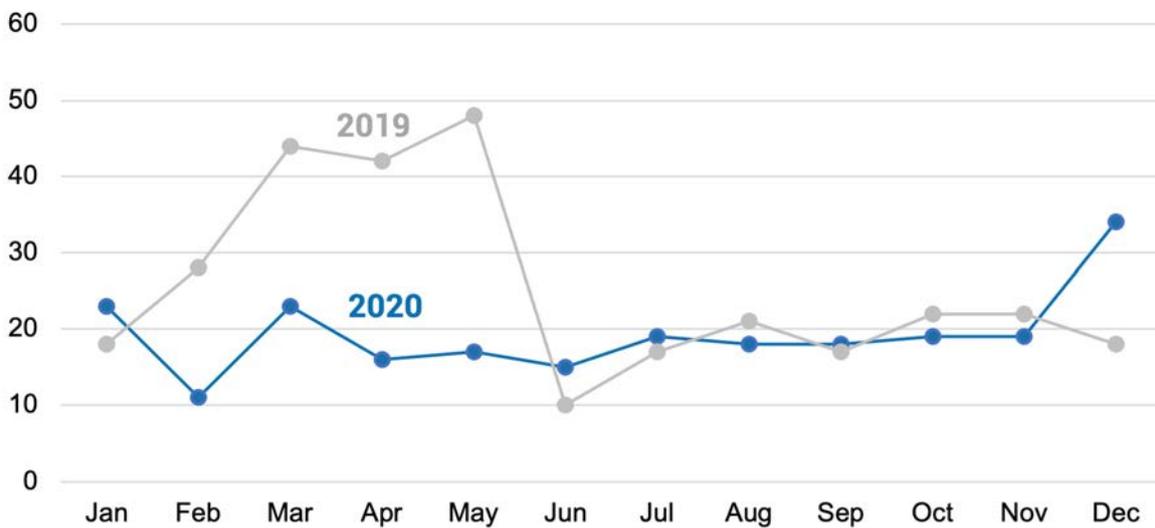
³ B. O. de Vera, Inquirer.net, "Cigarette smuggling up despite lockdown," <https://business.inquirer.net/295224/cigarette-smuggling-up-despite-lockdown>

B.5. Political issues

Incidents attributed to political issues were 24% less than in 2019, but mainly because the 2019 numbers were lifted by violence related to the May 13 elections. (See [Figure 11](#)). However, violent extremism events – which are classified as identity-political issues but presented in this section – persisted in 2020 and were 5% more than in 2019. In contrast,

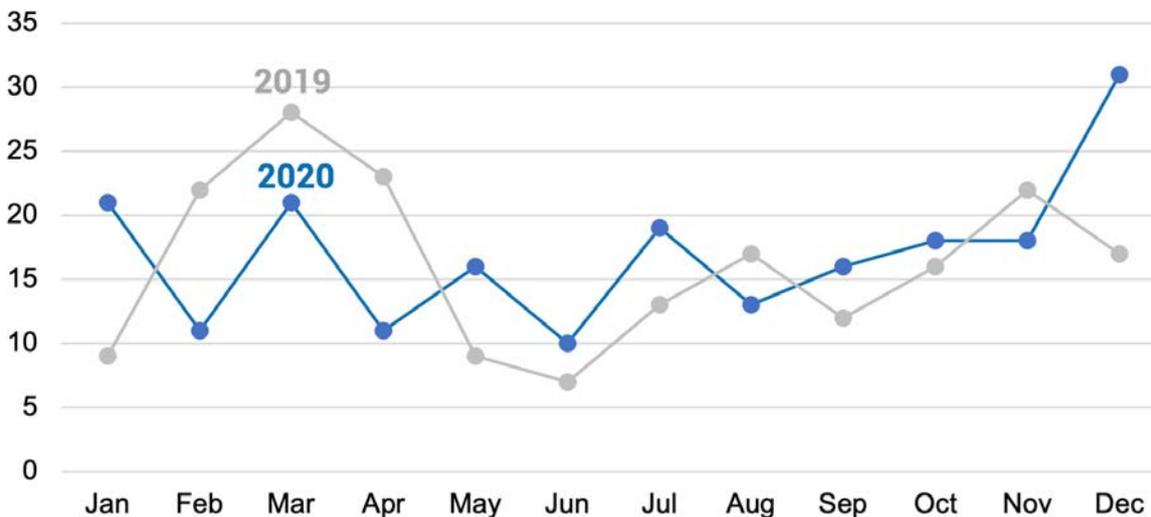
incidents fell by 26% in 2019 from 2018. However, for the March-May 2020 period, violent extremism attacks and clashes were 20% less compared to the same months in 2019, demonstrating how the onset of the COVID-19 crisis and the corresponding countermeasures managed to curtail this driver of violence, albeit in a limited way. (See [Figure 12](#)).

Figure 11. Political issues, BARMM and Isabela City, 2019-2020



Source: Conflict Alert

Figure 12. Violent extremism incidents, BARMM and Isabela, 2019-2020



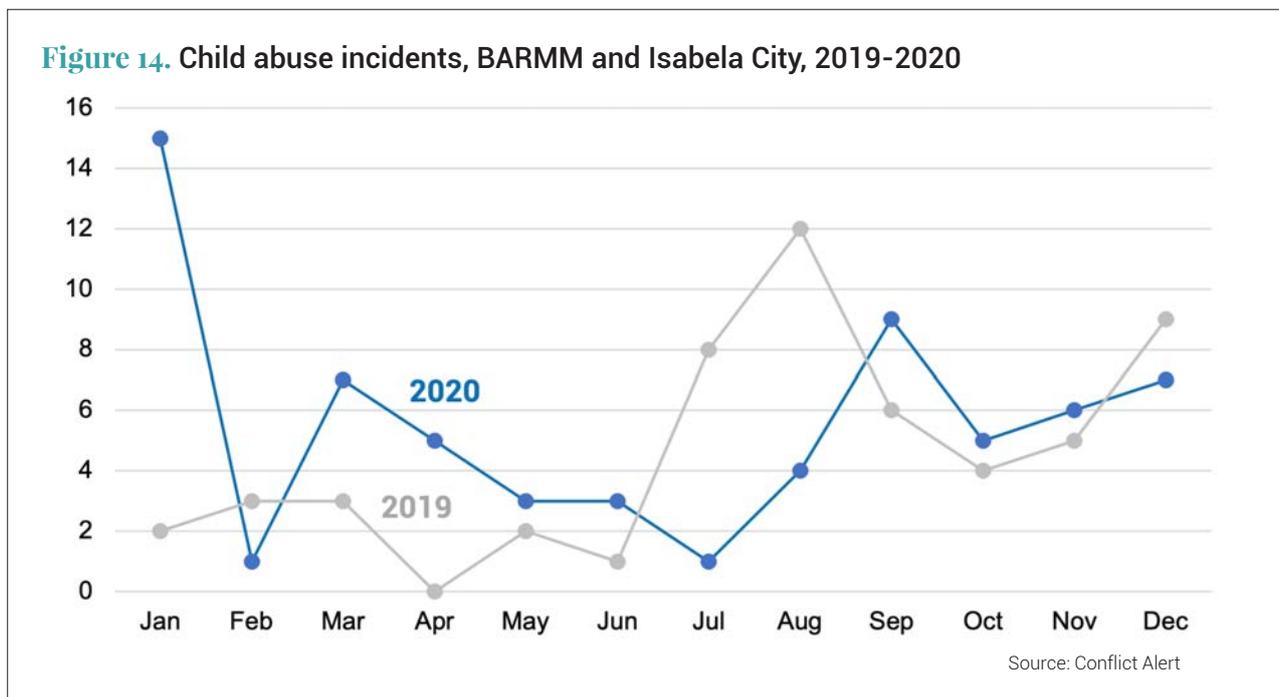
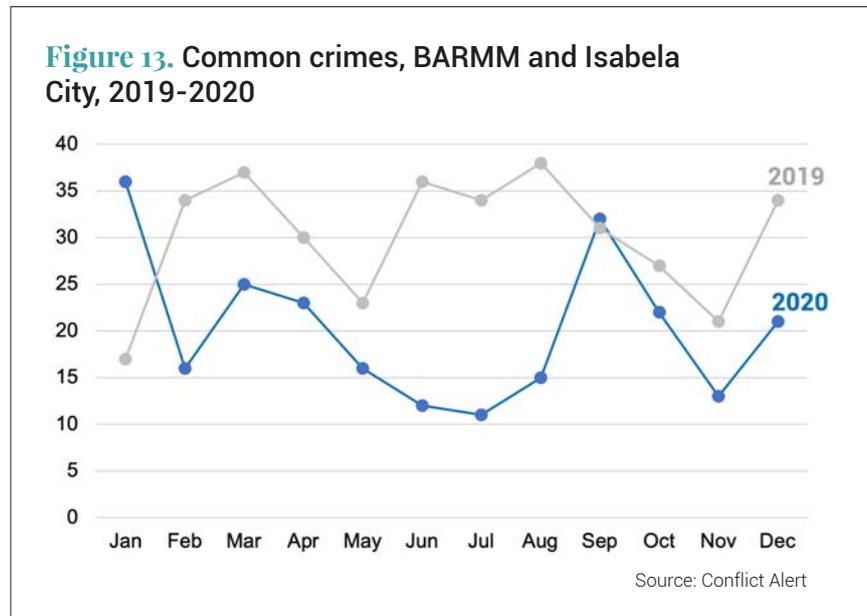
Source: Conflict Alert

B.6. Common crimes

Common crimes plunged by 33% in 2020, pulled down by robberies that fell to 89 incidents that year from 205 in 2019. Robberies in the Conflict Alert database include the carjacking of motorcycles and motor vehicles, which is classified as both a common crime and a shadow economy activity. Robberies alone, which sometimes intersected with other conflict drivers such as illicit firearms and drugs, comprised 39 incidents. Carjackings of motorcycles and motor vehicles summed up to 50 incidents. These numbers were lower respectively by 59% and 55% compared to 2019. The lockdowns and high visibility of security personnel, particularly in the urban areas where robberies and carjackings were rife, severely curtailed the movement of people and, thereby, the commission of crimes and criminal shadow activities.

Finally, as explained earlier in the discussion of gender-related identity issues, child abuse

is categorized in Conflict Alert as a common crime. The number of incidents rose to 66 in 2020 from 55 in 2019, with the March-June and September-November periods showing a higher number of incidents compared to the same months in 2019. (See **Figure 14**). Of these 66 incidents, around 77% victimized girl children, a higher proportion than the 55% in 2019, with abuse mostly in the form of sexual molestation, including rape.





Women receive food packs and personal hygiene kits at the height of the lockdown in March 2020. Photo courtesy of Mhay Hassan

Conclusion

The government lockdowns in the Bangsamoro received the legitimacy and authority that were required in combating a pandemic from a public that feared the apparent severity of an unknown disease. The utilization of the same martial law tactics that worked so well following the war in Marawi was also successful in preventing a wider crisis in the Bangsamoro.

However, the government's heavy-handed response to the COVID-19 pandemic increased the pressure on a public already weary of martial law and triggered new incidents of violence. It also failed to make a dent on violent extremism and exacerbated gender-related violence and child abuse.

There were signs that the reporting of gender violence increased during the lockdown despite the stigma attached to it. However, the pressure to protect the family or clan reputation, the lack of a system that encourages reporting of incidents particularly

in the rural areas, and the traditional settlement practices that are biased against the victims but to which they submit remained as some of the more incorrigible issues that deterred the true reporting of violence against women.

Beyond the violence against women lay an even more dangerous truth – the spike in cases of child abuse during the pandemic. The figures were worse than those on gender-based violence yet the harm has not been captured in the media, or highlighted by the authorities, and by civil society at large.

The inexorable truth is that the lockdowns engineered a paradox: meant to seclude and protect people against the disease, they instead created victims of gender violence and child abuse. Too often, as this research found out, police reports on incidents involving women and children lacked data on the relationship between victim and alleged perpetrator and the location of the incidents. But when these details were available, they

underscored how (a) the incidents happened in the victims' homes; (b) many perpetrators in women's cases were husbands; and (c) among perpetrators in child abuse cases were intimately close to the victims: fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles, and neighbors.

The findings raise the necessity of complete police reports and making these more available to be able to better analyze the factors behind incidents of abuses of women and children in the Bangsamoro and craft appropriate policy responses to them, particularly during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The available data make the case for making the government's COVID-19 response sensitive to the vulnerabilities of women and children in the event that severe lockdowns are reimposed to arrest the spread of the disease. It needs to start with a recognition that home confinement risks an increase in violence against women and children. As such, there should be a system to make the reporting of abuses easy and that guarantees quick action on the complaints. Places must be available where victims can go to seek protection and refuge from the violence. ●



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This project receives funding from **The World Bank Group**.



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Conflict Alert was developed and is run by the Philippines Programme of International Alert, an independent peacebuilding organization.

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CEMS CRITICAL EVENTS MONITORING SYSTEM

International Alert's Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) is an SMS- and high frequency radio-based reporting system that captures conflict incidents and tensions in communities. It is used by the Early Response Network (ERN), a group of men and women in various localities in the Bangsamoro, who share real-time information and work with local governments, key agencies, the security sector, and religious and traditional leaders in coordinating quick and context-specific responses to tensions, violent conflicts, disasters, and displacement, as they happen.

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