

Philippine troops battle Islamist militants in city



Reinforcements arrive in Marawi.

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Philippine troops aboard helicopters and in armoured vehicles battled Islamist militants inside the southern city of Marawi yesterday as reports emerged of the gunmen murdering civilians.

An initial rampage by the gunmen, who have pledged allegiance to Islamic State, through the mainly Muslim city on Tuesday prompted President Rodrigo Duterte to impose martial law across the province of Mindanao.

Authorities said ending the crisis was proving extremely hard because the militants were holed up in residential buildings, had planted improvised bombs in the streets and had taken Catholic hostages. "People are afraid. They do not want to open establishments. - Offices are closed. We do not want people to be used as human shields," Marawi Mayor Majul Usman Gandamra said.

Two military helicopters flew above Marawi and armoured vehicle churned through its streets as automatic rifle firing could be heard yesterday. Marawi has about 200,000 - residents but many of them have fled because of the fighting.

Five soldiers and one policemen died in the clashes, while 13 gunmen were killed, according to the military. Authorities have not reported any civilian casualties but GMA television showed images of nine people who had apparently been shot dead. The victims had their hands tied together.

They were captured at a roadside checkpoint and murdered by the militants after being identified as Christians, GMA said.

Mr Duterte said on Wednesday one policeman was similarly caught at a checkpoint set up by the militants and beheaded. There are only between 50 and 100 gunmen. The militants are also holding between 12 and 15 Catholic hostages abducted from a church in the city.

The fighting erupted on Tuesday after security forces raided a house where they believed Isnlon Hapilon, a leader of the Abu Sayyaf kidnap-for-ransom gang and Philippine head of ISIS, was hiding. The US regards Hapilon as one of the world's most dangerous terrorists, offering a bounty of \$US5 million (\$6.7m) for his capture.

However the raid went wrong as dozens of gunmen emerged to repel the troops, then went on a rampage across the city while flying black ISIS flags. The militants raided two jails, leading to the escape of more than 100 inmates. They also set fire to many buildings, including a church and a university.

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