

‘Buhay pa kami’ (‘We Are Still Alive’): Dispatches from Marawi

Dispatch 01: Dansalan 38

On Day 1, they barricaded all doors — piling furniture atop one other — fortifying a basement meant for a few so all 38 of them could be safe. 30 adults and 8 children, including a 2-month-old baby. All of them Christians, all of them targets of militants inspired by the Islamic State who were going door-to-door to kill anyone who did not share their beliefs.

On Day 2, the group decided on rules to survive while in hiding: ration the available food supply, conserve mobile phone batteries, and run stealthily to a nearby rain gutter and stock up on potable water. But there was one rule they could never break: stay quiet. If they could keep it, then they would have a good chance to stay alive.

On Day 3, the air strikes began. Noisy spinning rotors broke the silence in their sanctuary. Military choppers made several passes, zigzagging across the skies before the humming faded away. Silence followed. Then, without warning, a yellow flash of light from outside broke into the cracks on the floorboard above them. Slivers of light piercing through. Boom. A powerful explosion shook the walls as the children clutched at their parents. Then the humming returned, followed by another ominous silence. Boom. Another one. This time, closer. It went on and on, each explosion seemingly inching slowly towards them. No one slept soundly that night.

On the fourth day, they heard a voice that wasn’t their own.

“Lumabas na kayo, ‘di kayo masasaktan!”

The man was speaking in Maranao, the local language. The voice was followed by footsteps above. Two, three, four more men joined him.

“Lumabas na kayo!” the man repeated. This time, it was more a threat rather than a request.

Still, they kept their silence. The parents held their hands over their children’s mouths to muffle the cries. Breathe easy, they told each other. Do not panic. Stay quiet – it was the only rule they could not break.

Teodoro “Loloy” Dando was one of the 38 who cowered in the basement, which became increasingly claustrophobic as the footsteps grew louder.

Their group, mostly teachers and staff members of the Dansalan College Foundation, had sought refuge there after armed men clad in black targeted the Christian school and laid siege to Marawi City. On the first night of the attack, the school was burned to the ground — lighting up the sky in orange as civilians retreated to the shadows.

Loloy, a family driver, was at the school to pick up his wife, Gracia. She was a teacher at the school and was waiting with their only son, Brian, when the armed men first attacked.

They were in the wrong place at the worst moment. The bandits had high-powered firearms with them and were on the hunt for what they called kafir — non-believers.

Those who were in school ran in different directions, all looking for a place to hide. The winding tension cut by the sudden rattling of gunfire and the burst of screams.

When Loloy found his family, he instantly knew where to bring them: his employer’s house. It was a few kilometers away and they could make a run for it. More importantly, his boss is a Muslim. If it was true that the armed men were hunting down Christians, he thought that it would be the safest place to seek refuge.

But, at the time, Gracia and Brian weren't by themselves anymore. Other teachers and employees of the school were with them, and begged Loloy to take them all along. They heard that gunmen had filled the streets outside and were blocking anyone who dared to run.

"Sabi nila, 'Kuya, huwag mo kami pababayaan. Samahan mo kami'," Loloy recounted. Loloy shuttled everyone to his employer's house. He made several trips with the Toyota Innova he was driving, dodging sniper fire in the emptying streets of Marawi.

Loloy's boss told them they'd try to get out of the city and find help. The Christians could stay and hide underground. The streets weren't safe for them anymore.

The armed men had reportedly been accosting civilians, asking them to recite Muslim prayers so they could pass through. Loloy's boss asked him if he wanted his family to go with them as he stayed with the civilians.

Gracia and Brian refused to go. They wanted their family to stick together.

"Sabi ko sa asawa ko, umalis na kayo. 'Di sila umalis. Gusto nila sama-sama kami."

So, they all stayed behind. One of the teachers had contact with the military stationed outside of the danger zone. Everyday, they would ask for help. Every single time, they would get the same reply: "Ililigtas namin kayo. Kaunting tiis lang."

It was safer to wait it out.

But, on the fourth day, the armed men stepped foot inside the house. Again, the unbreakable rule: Not a sound from them, or face certain death.

"Yung iba, iiyak na lang. 'Yung punto na 'yon iiyak na rin ako. 'Di na naniniwala kasi ang tagal na. Akala namin dalawa, tatlong araw lang 'yong gulo. Pero hindi pala. Konting tiis, konting tiis. Iyak na lang," Loloy said.

“Kailan pa kaya kami i-rescue? Kaunting tiis na lang daw. Hanggang kailan ba ang kaunting tiis na ‘yon?”

It was a waiting game that no one knew how to win.

Dispatch 02: The Mayor

Across town, the mayor of Marawi City had also barricaded city hall.

The chipped, white, metal gates were shut. Soldiers and police surrounded the complex, forming firing lines in key posts. Weapons in position, fingers on triggers, ready to retaliate against anyone who dared enter the premises. They were defenders of a castle about to be attacked.

The mayor stood at the balcony, his most trusted men around him, plotting out how to get as many civilians out of Marawi as fast as they could. The truth had set in: members of the Maute group had overrun his city.

The clash began as a covert military operation to capture Isnilon Hapilon, current head of the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf that had pledged loyalty to Islamic State (ISIS) leader Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Hapilon is backed by the Maute Group, another terrorist organization based in the southern Philippines.

Months before, terror cells composed of Maute Group members had popped up in the Philippines capital Manila and threatened to bomb the US Embassy as they sought validation from ISIS. The bomb attack was foiled by the Philippine National Police.

But on May 23, the military faced an enemy in Marawi far more prepared to take them on.

On the first day alone, the men clad in black killed police and civilians in the local hospital, freed prisoners from the city jail, and took Christians, including a priest, hostage. They burned down the Christian school in the city, and terrorized the Islamic city.

Residents, both Christians and Muslims, barricaded themselves inside their homes out of fear of getting caught in the crossfire. Those who could still leave fled on foot and moved into evacuation centers Iligan City and in neighboring towns. The troops on the ground called for back-up.

When the first shots were fired, Mayor Majul Usman Gandamra was on his way to visit a relative in a neighboring town. There, reports of the attack reached him — village chiefs had alerted him of swarms of men, firing in the streets, assaulting anyone who couldn't pledge the same loyalty they professed. The city's chief of police, meanwhile, began searching for the mayor. He needed to secure the elected leader.

Yet once they made contact, the mayor gave a different instruction: stay at city hall. The seat of power had to be protected. Defend it at all costs.

“We don't want them to take over the city hall. We don't want them to install itong flag nila. ‘Yun ang naririnig namin na basta lang malagyan ng ISIS flag, sapat na sa kanila. Hindi pwede ‘yon.”

When the mayor reached the city hall complex, he was met by employees who had holed up inside the main building. Dozens of residents who lived nearby had also taken shelter inside the complex. All were afraid to step outside as gunfire intensified. The war zone was just a few hundred meters away from their location. Sniper bullets pierced through windows on the top floor. The walls were riddled with bullets.

“We were advised not to engage, manaka-naka lang na putok para ma-divert ‘yung attention.”

Those who holed themselves up inside city hall defended it as best they could. Lookouts were placed in various posts throughout the building. Those with firepower manned the gates and entrances. Enemy snipers would continually fire from the outside.

Still, the mayor stood his ground. This was the people’s house, he said. No one was going to take it from them.

In the days that followed, rooms where local policy was discussed just a week earlier had turned into a barracks for police and military. Stained uniforms hung by the doorknobs, spare ammunition stocked in a corner. The foyer leading to the mayor’s office had been turned into a makeshift kitchen, with a camping stove as its centerpiece. The storied hallways had turned into bed spaces. The mayor slept in an old couch by the stairs on the second floor. It had a full view of a gallery of photographs, framed and neatly lined up on a wall downstairs: former mayors of Marawi.

Those who never had to face a crisis like this.

On Day 4, dawn cracked with the intermittent sound of gunfire.

The military told the mayor that they were in absolute control of the complex. More troops arrived to secure the place. The roads leading to the provincial capitol of Lanao del Sur, a little more than a kilometer away, had been cleared. Government and military officials set up a crisis center there. Help arrived. And, while the clash had been contained at the nearby Banggolo bridge, staying inside city hall still proved dangerous for the mayor and civilians.

In other words, it was time to leave.

As they evacuated, the mayor looked at the section of the city he was leaving behind — abandoned houses, smoke billowing from a distance, and smoldering ruins of once vibrant communities.

There, too, was the Philippine flag still hoisted above city hall, its sun and three stars, still shining brightly amid dark times ahead.

Dispatch 03: Saipoding

In a matter of days, Marawi transformed into a ghost town.

The city's population of 200,000 suddenly dwindled – rows of houses abandoned, chains latched onto doors. Steel gates pulled down over storefronts, shutters closed. Old, used tires piled up on deserted streets, blocking any civilians from entering.

Police traded in their blue, crisp uniforms and shiny black leather shoes for a more battle-ready look: fatigues and boots. Each block had around 10 of them, flagging down cars attempting to enter and exit the city. They asked passengers to show identification and allow them to search the car for enemy stowaways. Vehicles put up DIY white flags — a white shirt over a rod — as a sign that they were innocent civilians. It became a warning sign for soldiers and Maute fighters: don't shoot. Most of the time, it worked.

The names of streets, districts, and villages soon became irrelevant. Now, there were only safe zones and danger zones, with lines that separated them becoming blurrier as each day passed. Each day, the list of where you could go in Marawi became shorter and shorter. The list of where you couldn't, longer.

Most of the action in the city had been confined in two places: the unseen war zone in the Banggolo district where mortar fire could be heard throughout the day, and the provincial capitol where authorities set up a crisis management committee.

Journalists, both local and foreign, set up shop, too, in the capitol compound. It was the safest zone, officials would say. Daily press briefings on the state of Marawi were given there.

On one particular Monday, top military and government officials faced the media.

Journalists fired off questions one after the other: Why is the battle taking so long? What's going to happen next? How many more civilians are trapped inside the war zone? How many terrorists are they actually fighting? Was government not prepared for this? Were intel reports faulty? When will this be over?

Amid the chaos came Saipoding Mariga. His hooded eyes were bleary and bloodshot, in desperate need of sleep. He wasn't a journalist but he took his turn and hit officials with a bullet of a question, one they couldn't dodge: Can you rescue my wife inside the war zone? She's trapped and she's wounded.

Officials were stunned. Suddenly, they were confronted by a man directly affected by the violence that had permeated the city.

Saipoding was told to provide details of his wife to the military once the press briefing was over.

But it wasn't enough. Outside, journalists followed Saipoding, who took the opportunity to make his appeal more public. As he faced TV cameras, he pleaded to be allowed to enter the conflict zone to rescue his wife himself. He burst into tears as he appealed for an end to the ongoing air strikes.

“Hanggang ngayon may communication kami ng asawa ko. Ang masama, na-trauma siya sa mga bomba. Maawa kayo Presidente! Maawa kayo, itigil na po ninyo ang air strike. Huwag po kayo maawa sa akin, maawa kayo sa mga na-trap po sa amin. Tama na Mr. President, tama na po.”

Saipoding had just arrived from Manila. After he heard news of his wife trapped inside the war zone, he traveled to Marawi, by land and sea.

His sister had been with his wife, Geraldine, in their house in Marawi when the gunmen first attacked. They stayed together for three days. But Geraldine was hit by bullets in her legs and bomb shrapnel in other parts of her body. Saipoding’s sister left to ask for help, but she wasn’t allowed to go back into the heavily bombarded neighborhood.

Geraldine was left to survive on her own.

Three days after that press conference, Saipoding went to a military checkpoint. Once again, he begged them to let him through.

He had a small plastic bag with him filled with two bottles of water, a banana, and a slice of egg pie. He no longer had contact with Geraldine, and did not know if she still had food or if she was still alive.

“Mahirap mawalan ng asawa. Makikiusap po ako na i-sasakripisyo ko ang sarili ko para lang mailigtas yung asawa ko.”

Like all civilians, he wasn’t allowed to get through. It was too dangerous to cross.

But there was a resolve in Saipoding’s eyes: if the military wouldn’t save the love of his life, he would.

Dispatch 04: Loloy

Silence again descended on the basement where 38 civilians sought refuge.

The heavy footsteps from above were gone. The hunters who earlier entered the premises had left, unaware that the hunted were just a few meters below them. Silence kept them alive.

But Loloy was not in a celebratory mood. His tough, rugged face refused to crack a smile.

If anything, it was a reminder that any moment could be their last. It was a close call. Too close. And he knew they couldn't stay hidden underground for long. He was sure that the pro-ISIS fighters would return and find them.

And there was another growing concern them – a more immediate kind. They had 38 mouths to feed, and supplies were running low.

His employer left them sacks of rice in the basement. They were meant for the *iftars* — meals to break fast — during the month-long Ramadan. As days went on, the supply depleted. It also became difficult for them to cook with the small gasoline stove they had — they were afraid to catch attention. At times, they would only eat once a day to conserve what little they had.

The mother of the 2-month-old baby couldn't breastfeed anymore. They needed to find others ways to make the crying stop.

“Yung bata iiyak. ‘Yung nanay magpapadede, wala nang gatas. ‘Yung isang teacher, may chocolate, pinahid sa daliri at pinadede ‘yong kamay para lang tumahan.”

Anxiety spread among the 38 trapped in the basement. Living conditions were far from ideal. Adults and children slept on the ground. No mats, no blankets. Only the cold, damp

concrete on their flesh. Sleep would often be interrupted by bombardments outside, echoes of rockets, mortar and shells lulling them all back to rest. The stench from the urine and wastes of 38 people living together in a cramped space became unbearable too. With water a scarce resource, hygiene wasn't on the list of priorities.

“38 lahat kami. Dudumi kami. Iihi. Hindi mo na kaya ‘yong amoy.”

At times, the foul, stagnant, and tepid air in the room seemed to rear up, and some would snap angrily at the other: Can't you make your child stop crying? Can you not eat too much? Why hasn't the military contacted us yet? Yet, what weighed heavily in Loloy's mind the most was his son, Brian, whose weight had significantly dropped in just a few short days. Pale and gaunt, Brian was no longer able to move. Looking mummified in a corner, eyes closed and mind on prayer. Brian had been diagnosed with toxic goiter. He was in dire need of medication they didn't have.

Loloy's wife, Gracia, only hoped for her son's survival.

“Yung anak ko, nag-deteriorate. Pag tingin ko sa anak ko, God, maawa na lang kayo sa aking anak. Kung tuloy-tuloy lang kami rito, what will happen to my son? Kapag hindi kami makalabas dito, unang mawawala ‘yong anak ko. ‘Yun ang hindi ko kaya.”

“Sa totoo lang, bilang ina, makita mo ‘yung sitwasyon ng anak mo ganon...ang sakit.

Pero wala talaga kami magawa.”

Loloy felt just as helpless. He often thought of his employer's earlier offer to evacuate his family. But before regret could cross his mind, he told himself repeatedly what the military had told them: “Kaunti na lang, sabi ng militar. Kaunting tiis na lang.”

On Day 11, the group received a message from their military contact. For the first time in days, it wasn't the usual plea for patience. Instead, what they hoped for most in the last

few days, the idea that sustained them, had suddenly been snatched away: rescuers will not be able to get them.

“Sabi ng militar: ‘Di namin kayo mapupuntahan. Maraming kalaban. Ang dami nang nalagas sa amin, ang daming wounded. Tumakbo na kayo. Sasalubungin namin kayo. ‘Yung mga babae mag-kumbong saka mag-malong. ‘Yung mga lalake, magtanggap ng suot sa taas at itaas ang kamay.’”

Loloy’s heart sank. The sliver of optimism he felt while inside that basement turned into a sudden pang of dread.

The group had to choose which of the two fates they would rather suffer: Stay in the basement with little food and water left or leave and run through streets filled with enemy snipers eager to let bullets fly.

On Day 12, before dawn, Loloy and the group slowly took down the barricades they had built inside the house. It was time to leave. It was time to run. “Lumabas ako. Sabi ko, ‘Diyos ko, ikaw na bahala sa amin. Lord, sana kami lahat ay mabuhay’.”

He led the exodus, carrying a small wooden bar he had found with a white shirt attached on one end. It would be a frantic, two-kilometer dash to reach rescue teams waiting at the safe zone.

What came next was a blur for Loloy. The scope of the disaster that greeted them was too much to comprehend: corpses everywhere, charred debris blocking roads, infrastructure riddled with bullet holes. Loloy was barefoot but he didn’t mind the shattered glass littered across the streets that he had to run through.

“Wala na ako pakialam. Wala na ako tingin sa side by side. May mga sniper kaya dire-diretso lang.”

As they got closer to salvation, he turned to the group. His wife and son were no longer with them.

“Medyo malayo na, tumingin ako sa likod, wala na ‘yung asawa ko at anak ko sa likod. Bumagsak na pala. Binigay ko ‘yung flag sa isang babaeng teacher, sabi ko, mauna na sila.”

When Loloy found his family, his son begged him to keep running and to leave him.

“Sabi niya, ‘Tay di ko na kaya. Iwan mo na ako. Naiyak ako. Sabi ko, ‘nak, kaya kita. Kaya kita anak. Binuhat ko siya. ‘Yung mga teacher na kasama ko, na-protektahan ko sila sa tulong ng Diyos. Pababayaan ba kita?’”

With all his might, Loloy carried his 17-year-old son as he did when his child was just born, cradling him with the little strength he had left as he ran towards the finish line. As promised, the rescuers were there. A medic took Brian immediately and inserted an IV line in his bone-thin arm. Loloy looked around. The 2-month-old baby they were with was surrounded by soldiers, giving him a much-needed diaper change. His wife, Gracia, sat down in a corner and once again whispered a prayer. Eyes closed with tears falling on her cheeks.

Then came a sound almost alien to their ears. Music. Singing. Not the rockets, mortars or shells that had serenaded them on those long days and longer nights inside the basement.

Rescuers sang in unison to one of the teachers. It was her birthday.

All 38 of them were all alive. All accounted for.

For the first time in 12 days, Loloy allowed himself to smile.

Dispatch 05: Police Officer Lidasan

Police Officer Lumna Lidasan had a knack for taking selfies. All smiles, he said.

Right arm stretched out above his head, hand carefully gripping his mobile phone.

Click. Snap.

He looked at the grainy photo on his mobile phone: faces beaming with smiles in a dimly lit room. A man can be seen soundly sleeping in the background, on the floor with a pillow covering his face; another, stretched out in an 8-seater corner sofa with a towel over his head. Lidasan swiped over the gallery of photos he had taken in the past week: selfies of them smiling in another room in the house, selfies of them smiling with a small gasoline stove where they would cook meals, and shots of the building across the street, burning intensely under Marawi's night sky. Click. Snap. It was Day 12. Lidasan took another photo of the group — crooked, unsure smiles hiding the paralyzing fear that had engulfed them. This was to be their proof of life — portraits from a small bungalow with a cellar they had holed themselves up. They were going to send it out to loved ones, and they couldn't know that they were afraid.

Marawi City police officers Lidasan, Ibrahim Wahab, Ricky Alawi, Esmael Adao, and Bernard Villaries have been in hiding since the attack of the Maute members began. They had been assigned to man a police community precinct near the city's commercial area. When the pro-ISIS battalion began their attack on May 23, the cops knew that they could make a run for it. All five of them were Muslim. They were certain that they could change out of their uniforms, hide their badges and pretend they were civilians. They were sure that the terrorists would allow them to leave if they could perfectly recite passages from the Quran. It had been the litmus test for the terrorists hunting down their

so-called “non-believers.” But then, five civilians who had worked at a nearby construction site sought help from the policemen. They were all Christians.

“Naisip ko kasi, kami okay lang. May chances kami. Pero paano naman ‘yung mga Christians? Alam ko chances nila ay masyadong maliit,” Lidasan said.

So, instead of running, the police stuck to an oath they made a long time ago: to serve and to protect.

The five Muslim cops brought the five Christian civilians into a small house owned by a nearby village chief and hid them there.

After nine days in hiding, without a word to the police, the village chief decided to escape on his own.

“Walang paalam, iniwan kami. Buti na lang, nakakuha kami ng supplies. May canned goods, bigas. Ginawa namin, ni-lock namin ‘yong pintuan, nilagyan namin ng mabibigat na bagay para hindi kami basta-basta mapasukan.”

And, like the other civilians who had hunkered down inside houses, the group was discovered by the enemy. The armed men, dressed in their full, black, battle-regalia, pounded on their door. Everyone inside the house was told to step out.

“Sabi sa amin, lumabas kayo diyan. Ilan kayo diyan? Puro ba kayo lalake? Lumabas kayo! Ayaw namin lumabas, papatayin kami kasi pulis kami. Lalo na ‘yung mga Christians. Kapag tinanong sila at hindi sila marunong mag-Maranao, papatayin sila.”

The police officers told the civilians to hide in the cellar and to keep quiet. The police answered the armed men in Maranao, the local language. They told the armed men that there were only Muslims inside the house, and that they were all innocent civilians.

Police officer Wahab assured the civilians that they would not let the armed men in.

“Nangako kami sa mga Christians. Hindi namin sila iiwan, kahit do’n na kami mamatay sama-sama. ‘Di talaga namin sila iiwan.”

After almost half an hour, the police officers convinced the militants to leave them alone. They were all Muslims there, they insisted. All civilians.

Days turned into nights, and time passed slowly. The group counted days through the number of supplies they had left. The stock of rice had almost been depleted. The only things left to eat were salt and sugar.

When the police officers felt it was safe to step outside, they would quickly run towards a corner of the street, bucket in tow, to catch rain water. Suicide missions, they would call it.

One of the police officers was able to secure solar batteries so they could sustain power for one mobile phone.

Click. Snap.

More selfies to send out. The smiles seemingly fading as days went on.

“Nagpalakas ng loob sa akin ‘yung mga Christians. Kapag nakitaan nila kami na napanghinaan ng loob, kawawa ang mga ito. Kasi nahalata mo ‘yung iba do’n kuwan na eh, ‘yung naihi na sa pantalon. Alam mo ‘yung ‘di na sila makausap. Binibiro ko na lang, sinasayawan ko na lang sila. Sabi ko, ‘wag kayo malungkot. Buhay pa tayo.”

Police officer Alawi, the highest ranking among the trapped police, turned to prayer. He told the Christians to pray for them. He told his fellow cops to offer their prayers for the Christians.

When dawn broke on Day 22, the group decided that they could no longer stay inside the war zone. With news of the military gaining ground on the enemies, they thought that

they had a fighting chance – an opening to make the gruelling 2-kilometer dash to the safe zones. It was either die by escaping or die inside the house. There were no other options. So, all ten of them ran, seeking cover from sniper fire with buildings that have been torn out by blasts.

A salvo of bullets. Bang. Bang.

They kept running. One foot, right after the other. Bang. Bang. The area that the Maute group had sequestered no longer looked like the city they grew up in. It looked like Aleppo, Lidasan said, recalling images of the war-torn city in Syria. At the halfway point, they suddenly found themselves at gunpoint. A militant on the ground had spotted and stopped them. The cops slowly and carefully walked in front of the civilians, as if shielding them from what was about to come. When they were asked who they were, Lidasan answered.

“Tinatanong kung Muslim ba kaming lahat. Kinausap ‘yung isang Christian, siyempre ‘di makapagsalita. Sabi ko, ‘wag mo na kausapin ‘yan kasi kailangan na namin tumakbo.

Civilians kami. Inulan na kami ng bala kaya bingi na yan, ‘wag mo na kausapin ‘yan.”

The gunman let them pass. It was another close call.

When the group neared Banggolo bridge, they knew that their death-defying run was on its final stretch. They could see the troops waiting on the other side, waving their hands vigorously, motioning them to run a bit faster. There were 20 meters to go, yet no cover in sight to protect them from the volley of sniper fire.

Bang. Bang. More sniper fire from nearby buildings where the terrorists nested.

All of them dropped to the ground. They started to crawl.

Bang. Bang. Almost there, they said. Bang. One of the civilians was grazed by a bullet on

his left leg. Almost there, they said. Almost there. Bullets bouncing off concrete. Bang. In an hour, all ten of them were sitting in a row on a wooden bench. Unsure of what had just transpired. They were in full view of TV cameras. Reporters based in the safe zone who had anxiously waited for them now surrounded them. Rescuers and other policemen stood on one side, eyes glued to the miracle they just witnessed.

Police officer Lidasan was in tears.

After 22 harrowing days inside the conflict area, the 10 of them survived. This was their moment to tell their story. A portrait of 10 survivors.

Click. Snap.

Dispatch 06: Geraldine

5 cops, 5 civilians rescued from the war zone after 22 days.

Saipoding blinked rapidly once or twice. He fidgeted for a moment, unsure of what he had just heard.

Since he was turned away by soldiers at the checkpoint, Saipoding decided to stay at the capitol complex. Day in and day out, he would sit in a corner, just waiting for news. He'd beg for any updates about his wife, Geraldine, who still was trapped in their house in Moncado Kadingilan. Sometimes, he would walk aimlessly around: maybe, just maybe, talking to strangers might just prove useful in his attempt to cross the war zone. But no one was allowed. With bullets reaching even the safest of safe zones in Marawi, it was impossible for any civilian to be let inside the war zone. At the capitol, he stayed. At least there, he could wait for news. So, Saipoding waited – 16, 17, 18 days. It felt like he

was in limbo.

It had been over a week since he last heard from his wife. He didn't know if she was dead from the gunshot wound or if she was still alive, waiting for him too.

“Walang nagsasabi po sa akin na buhay siya. Lahat ng ano sa akin, wala na ‘yung misis mo, baka patay na. Ako naman, malakas ang loob ko. Nararamdaman ko buhay ko siya.”

19, 20, 21 days. Still no word.

Saipoding would often think about the first time he met Geraldine, 24 years ago, on the busy streets of Manila. He was a security guard for a pawnshop at Paco district. She sold clothes in a tiny stall a few blocks away. He thought that Geraldine was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He would ask her to meet him at Delpan in the afternoon so they could get to know each other. Day in and day out, Saipoding would ask Geraldine to be his.

It took three years before she gave that elusive “yes.”

“Nahirapan ako sa kanya manligaw. Siyempre kinikilatis niya ako. Baka mamaya makuha ko na raw siya sa mga sinasabi ko na forever-forever ta's iiwan ko lang siya. Sabi ko sa kanya, hindi kita iiwan kahit anong mangyari.”

Saipoding thought of that moment over and over again as he waited by the capitol building. He waited for three years for Geraldine before. Certainly, he thought, he could wait for her again.

News of the policemen's escape gave him another shot of much-needed hope. If they made it out alive after 22 days, then Geraldine could, too.

Then, finally that night, there was a dispatch: Geraldine was alive. It was a phrase Saipoding had desperately been hoping to hear for so many days.

Scout Rangers found Geraldine, half-conscious and bleeding on the floor of their house.

There were several gunshot wounds in her leg, and shrapnel hit her body and head several times.

But Geraldine was alive.

Saipoding rubbed his reddish, sleep-deprived eyes with the insides of his palms, as he stood by the glass doors of the small clinic inside the capitol complex. Rescuers were set to bring Geraldine in at any moment.

10, 20, 30 minutes passed.

An ambulance arrived. Saipoding held his breath. Finally, he would see Geraldine again.

The ambulance door opened but Geraldine wasn't there.

Saipoding let out a piercing cry. This was impossible, he thought. The military told him they had found Geraldine. He bawled, wiping away tears from his eyes as frustration crept in. Where was his wife? What will he tell their seven children?

10, 20, 30 minutes still.

Another ambulance arrived. At this point, a crowd had already gathered around Saipoding, curious to see how the story that had unfolded inside the capitol would turn out. The ambulance doors opened and there she was. It was Geraldine. Her lips were blue, she could barely move and was a shade or two away from death. But Geraldine was alive.

Her pulse was weak and thready, but Geraldine was alive.

Saipoding put his hand over his wide-open mouth even if no sound was coming out. He rushed to his wife, touching her arm and feeling the coldness on her skin, desperate to

still feel life in her body. Doctors said Geraldine's 3-week-old wounds had been infected and that she was in septic shock. She needed surgery and a blood transfusion right away.

Worse, the hospital's stock was unusable after power interruptions hit the city.

Geraldine's Type B blood wasn't very common. By luck or by chance, one of the rescuers, Ibrahim Ampa, also had the same blood type. So did one of the surgeons.

Without hesitation, they volunteered and donated blood to make sure Geraldine survived.

"Nandoon iyong willingness to help, 'yung feeling na you do something na nakaka-prolong sa nangangailangan," Ampa said. It was another long, sleepless night.

On Day 23, Saipoding sat next to Geraldine in the emergency room of the Amai Pakpak Hospital, which had also survived an attack by the Maute Group. She was one of its first patients. She was barely conscious and could barely recall how she survived weeks inside the conflict zone. But Saipoding understood everything she said.

"Nagbagsakan siya ng bomba sa malapit. Nakadapa siya, nag-cover pero tinamaan ng mga splinter. Tapos 'yung hita niya, tinamaan ng sniper. Nasa isip lang daw niya noon ay magdasal sa Panginoong Allah."

"Noong naubusan na siya ng pagkain, ang ginawa niya, nakadapa, gumapang siya papunta sa galon ng tubig. Binasa-basa niya 'yung damit niya at 'yun lang ang sinisipsip niya."

Saipoding looked at his wife and whispered: "Sorry at hindi kita agad na-rescue. Sana maintiindihan mo. Ang importante ay kilala mo ako, nagkita tayo at 'yun lang ang kailangan ko. At 'yun lang din ang kailangan mo."

Geraldine nodded.

For 22 days, Saipoding waited for Geraldine to come back to him. The wait was worth it.

Dispatch 07: The City of Marawi

Bayang magiliw

Perlas ng silanganan

Marawi Mayor Gandamra's eyes were fixed at the Philippine flag flying over city hall, as he sang the national anthem with a longing only the leader of a city under siege would know.

Around him were his fellow elected officials and ordinary citizens of Marawi — right hands over left chests, all singing the hymn together.

Alab ng puso

Sa dibdib mo'y buhay

It had been two weeks since the mayor barricaded himself inside the premises, before eventually transferring to safer ground. While the military has made strides in taking back most of the city from the bandits, the fighting raged on.

Lupang Hinirang

Duyan ka nang magiting

It was only Gandamra's second time back at city hall since evacuating. A mere 100 meters away, the battle continued. The sound of gunfire and bomb blasts echoed through the city hall grounds. Bullets from enemy snipers still rattled the compound. One even hit the mayor's parked car.

It was anything but safe. Yet Gandamra knew he had to be there. It was June 12, Independence Day.

Across the country, various ceremonies to mark the country's Independence Day were

being held. Politicians, dressed to the nines in traditional Filipiniana, strut across red carpets amid salutes from police and military, leading crowds as the flag was raised above city and municipal halls. There were marching bands, and speeches about freedom and how Filipinos of yore suffered and shed blood for it.

In the midst of war, Marawi was one with the nation. But there was no room of pomp of pageantry here.

The dress code included bullet-proof vests and protective helmets. There was no band. Instead, the rattle of gunfire and sporadic explosions punctuating every part of the prepared program. Police and military didn't march to the beat of drums. Instead, they stood guard around the perimeter against snipers ready to attack at any moment.

Each line from the national anthem rung truer and reverberated deeper here.

Sa manlulupig

Di ka pasisiil

The mayor gave a speech too, but his wasn't about freedom.

“This is a celebration of sweat and blood by our ancestors. In all the Independence Days celebrated during our lifetimes, this one takes an exemption as the freedom of our very own city is currently under attack. Our city has been ripped apart. Lives have been lost. Our homes, toppled. All due to senseless and ill-motivated causes,” said Gandamra, his voice shaky but steady. The mayor's voice broke. Tears fell as he talked to residents of Marawi who braved the danger so they could stand in city hall.

“We must...we must never lose hope. We must remain steadfast. We must fight for our children, fight for one another, and fight for our freedom. These criminals may have taken the lives of many of us — our soldiers, our people. But they can never destroy our

spirit and our dream. They can never destroy our faith in Allah...and our faith based on the true essence of Islam.”

“I am here with all that I am. I give and will continue to give everything to defend the city and our freedom.”

As the mayor spoke to the crowd in Maranao, the crowd began to cry in unison. Today wasn't just a celebration of Independence Day. Today was about a yearning for a Marawi they knew and would always fight for.

Sa Dagat at bundok sa simoy

At sa langit mo'y bughaw

May dilag ang tula

At awit sa paglayang minamahal

Loloy, his wife, Gracia, and the rest of the Dansalan 38 left Marawi City, seeking refuge in evacuation centers or homes of relatives and friends in nearby towns. With no means to earn a living, those displaced continue the fight to survive each day, even outside of the war zone.

Ang kislap ng watawat mo'y tagumpay na nagniningning

Ang bituin at araw niya'y kailanpama'y di magdidilim

Geraldine and Saipoding went back home with their 7 children, grateful for their reunion. They live, but the wounds of their experience are unlikely to ever heal. But, at least, they are together.

Lupa ng araw ng luwalhati't pagsinta

Buhay ay langit sa piling mo

The policemen went back to barracks, a flag at half-staff welcoming them in their return

– a grim reminder that not all those who fought for the country and its people were as fortunate.

Aming ligaya nang pag may mang-aapi

Ang mamatay ng dahil sayo

A father, a mayor, a cop, a husband, a mother – people whose lives were put on hold the day bandits decided to take over the Islamic City of Marawi. Their stories may vary and their backgrounds unique, but there is one thing that binds them together: They are alive, and despite all the little and big wars ahead of them, they will persevere.

The war wants to break them. The challenge is to never let it.