

Philippine church bombing causes fears of derailed peace process

Dozens were killed or wounded during mass Sunday at a cathedral in the majority Muslim part of the country, where most voters approved expanding an autonomous region to make peace.

by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [February 27, 2019](#) issue

Days after a vote in the Philippines opened a way to end one of Asia's longest armed insurgencies, bombs went off during Sunday mass at a Catholic cathedral in the mostly Muslim autonomous region called Muslim Mindanao.

Two explosions inside and outside of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Cathedral killed more than 20 people and wounded dozens on January 27 in Sulu province in the south of Mindanao.

"The province is home to a rival rebel faction that's opposed to the deal as well as smaller militant cells that not part of any peace process," Vatican News reported.

The results of the vote ratifying expansion of the majority Muslim autonomous region were announced January 25.

Mathews George Chunakara, general secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia, wrote in a statement that ecumenical leaders were hoping and praying that the cathedral attack would not derail the peace process in Mindanao.

CCA joined Catholic bishops in appealing "to Christians in the region to be in unity with all peace-loving Muslim and indigenous communities and work together against violent extremism."

While about 1.7 million people in predominantly Muslim areas voted in favor of the autonomous region—an overwhelming majority—most voters opposed it in Sulu, where the cathedral is located.

The referendum resulted from peace talks between the Philippine government and Muslim rebel groups, who “gave up their goal of an independent state in the majority Christian Philippines in exchange for broad autonomy,” the Associated Press reported. Under the agreement, more than 30,000 militants would demobilize and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region would have its own parliament governing daily affairs.

In nearly 50 years of separatist fighting in the area, an estimated 150,000 people have been killed.

“Muslim rebels have long been battling for the independence or autonomy on Mindanao, which they regard as their ancestral homeland dating back to when Arab traders arrived there in the 13th century,” Al Jazeera reported.

After the cathedral attack, Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte ordered airstrikes as part of “all-out war” against militants, according to news reports from the country.

Parties in the peace talks have hoped that an end to the conflict would “draw the investment needed to pull the region out of the brutal poverty that makes it a hotspot for violence,” Al Jazeera reported. —*Christian Century* staff

A version of this article, which was edited February 12, appears in the print edition under the title “Church in Philippines attacked shortly after peace referendum.”