

IS-influenced sleeper cells pose threat — Army chief

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There are Islamic State (IS)-influenced sleeper cells in various parts of the country that pose a threat to the public, the military said yesterday.

Philippine Army chief Lt. Gen. Rolando Joselito Bautista said these sleeper cells could orchestrate lone wolf terrorist activities.

“If they are activated, they can create terrorist activities all at the same time,” Bautista warned, adding that each cell may be composed of one or two terrorists. Bautista reiterated the IS-Maute group that wreaked havoc in Marawi has been totally reduced, not only in terms of leadership but also armament and foreign support, with its hardcore fighters neutralized in the battle during last year’s five-month siege.

But fragments are reportedly recruiting members, Bautista said, while the Abu Sayyaf group, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and Khilafa Islamiyah Mindanao continue to operate.

Even if such groups band together to launch another Marawi-like siege, Bautista believes that it would take them three to five years to do it.

So the military is ensuring that the government is able to provide for the basic needs of affected residents of Marawi, he said.

Bautista said although Abu Dar is considered as Isnilon Hapilon’s successor as the emir of IS in Southeast Asia, it would be difficult for him or any other replacement to earn the trust and respect of extremists.

Hapilon, Bautista said, now has a negative image because of how he allegedly abandoned his men and committed looting during the siege in Marawi.

But reacting to Bautista’s pronouncement, a source from the intelligence community, who requested anonymity, said he thinks that Bautista’s statement is purely speculative and not based on actual or factual information.

“When you say sleeper cell, they were recruited a long time ago, projected to a specific area, lay low for some time and maybe just gathering information and then activated for a specific mission or task,” the source explained.

The source noted that even if the IS-inspired terrorists return to their areas to recoup and consolidate, it will be difficult for them to launch individual and simultaneous attacks in different parts of the country due to financial, logistical, security and cultural reasons.

“Much more (for so-called) lone (wolves). Lone wolves are entirely different from sleeper cells. Lone wolves, for all intents and purposes, have no connection with IS because their attacks at the time of execution have no support or were not planned by the (IS) or any of its leaders,” the source stressed.