"This place is empty. Not a cop around. We are entering the Red Zone. What do you say, Philip, do we go in?" asked Muguntan as he drove about 40km an hour on the road cutting into half an oil palm plantation.

"Yes," I said.

There was an arch with the words "Selamat Datang Ke Zon Kampung Labian" (Welcome to Kampung Labian Zone), and I saw it as a sign that we should drive further in.

In the back of my mind, I was worried.

This was where a day earlier, The Star photographer Normimie Diun came face-to-face with a gunman dressed in black and who looked like he was in his 50s.

"Just drive up, there must be a roadblock somewhere," said PK.

"I don't think so, sir," said Muguntan.

The only living creatures we saw when we arrived at Kampung Tanjung Labian were a goat and a cow. The village was deserted, exuding an eerie atmosphere. Clothes were hanging on the verandah, and the doors of many of the wooden houses had been left open after villagers fled their homes when the military bombed Kampung Tanduo about 8 km away on March 5.

After taking photographs of the village, we returned to the main road. We were more afraid of the security forces than Sulu gunmen. Two days before, at nearby Kampung Sungai Bilis, a teenage boy was killed and a man injured when policemen, hearing sounds and spotting movements in the bushes, fired shots at that direction.

Although I desperately wanted to relieve myself, I decided to do so at the main road. I didn't want to be a collateral damage when policemen see "movements in the bushes". At the main road, we drove to a junction leading to Kampung Tanduo, which journalists called Ground Zero as that was where the Sulu armed group landed.

The day before, security forces secured the coastal village from the Sulu gunmen and hoisted the Malaysian flag.

We were hoping to get as close as possible to Kampung Tanduo. However, our drive on a muddy oil palm plantation track ended some 2km from Ground Zero. At a hilly point, an ambulance and an excavator were parked at a General Operations Force checkpoint.

Heavily armed GOF personnel rushed out with their rifles and an officer pointed at the no entry sign. The men in uniform looked tense. "Something must have happened," PK said. "Before the bombings started they allowed us to borrow their binoculars so that we could catch a glimpse of Kampung Tanduo."

Later, we found out what had happened. Earlier, after a 36-hour lull, a gunfight broke out near Kampung Tanjung Batu and a soldier and two gunmen were killed. Four days later and about 200km from Ground Zero, I took another walk on the wild side.

This time at Kampung Simunul in Semporna where six policemen and six Sulu gunmen were killed in a shootout on March 2. The feeling I got at the water village was it was more dangerous than Ground Zero. I felt that the Sulu gunmen were living among us.

– PHILIP GOLINGAI
The Star/ANN



Where danger lurks all around.

PHOTO: AFP