

## The Philippines' Continued Success Against Extremists

By Peter Chalk

THE EXTREMIST ENVIRONMENT in the Philippines continues to improve. The main organizations that have traditionally been at the forefront of national security concern are either exhibiting a continued readiness to engage in negotiations with the government in Manila or are variously suffering from battlefield losses, criminalization or reductions in popular support. Although there has been an increase in kidnappings by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), this is actually a sign of the group's weakness and declining capabilities. Moreover, the United States and Australia remain committed to underwriting assistance packages to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP), both of which continue to make steady advances in the struggle against violent extremism.

This article will outline the domestic security environment in the Philippines by examining the current state of three main organizations: the Abu Sayyaf Group,<sup>1</sup> the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)<sup>2</sup> and the New People's Army (NPA).<sup>3</sup> The article will then discuss the main parameters of U.S. and Australian security assistance to the Philippines and identify some of the main shortfalls that continue to hamper the overall effectiveness of Manila's counterterrorism efforts.

1 The ASG is a self-styled Moro jihadist group that seeks the creation of an exclusive Islamic State of Mindanao (MIS). It has been tied to regional and international terrorist movements, including Jemaah Islamiya and al-Qa`ida.

2 The MILF is the largest Moro insurgent group in Mindanao. For much of its existence the movement sought the creation of an independent Muslim state in Mindanao, but moderated its demands to enhanced autonomy following the death of Hashim Salamat—the MILF's hard line founder—in 2003. The group is currently engaged in sporadic peace negotiations with Manila.

3 The NPA acts as the military arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Its stated aim is to replace the existing Filipino political and economic structure with a socialist system through a protracted strategy of people's war.

### Abu Sayyaf Group

Despite occasional bombings and attacks against infrastructure, the ASG's current threat level is the lowest in years. As of April 2009, the group was estimated to have no more than 100 hardcore militants (and less than 350 weapons) at its disposal, supplemented by at most 200 part-time militants and maybe 30 foreign terrorists (predominantly Indonesians associated with Jemaah Islamiya's "pro-bombing" faction).<sup>4</sup> According to sources in the PNP, these members are split between at least 18 separate cells across Sulu, Basilan and Zamboanga and lack any sense of organizational, much less operational, cohesion.<sup>5</sup> The ASG has yet to select an *amir* (leader) that is accepted by the entire group. Radullah Sahiron is the closest person to such an individual. He is old, however, and suffers from acute diabetes and commands the loyalty of only approximately 60% of the group's fighters.<sup>6</sup>

The ASG's return to criminal enterprise, namely kidnapping for ransom, reflects the relative decline of the group and its capacity to perpetrate violence against the state. Western analysts in Manila believe this reflects a diminution in the group's ideological focus with the main aim now being purely financial in nature (allegedly to underwrite the campaigns and agendas of co-opted local politicians).<sup>7</sup> The AFP and PNP both view this development as "positive" in the sense that cadres motivated by money are far easier to bribe and "turn" than those who remain firm in their religious convictions.<sup>8</sup> Certainly this has been the experience in Colombia and is considered to be one of the main factors accounting for Bogota's success in infiltrating the highest echelons of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.<sup>9</sup>

4 Personal interviews, AFP officials, Manila, June 2009.

5 Personal interviews, PNP officials, Manila, June 2009.

6 Personal interviews, AFP officials, Zamboanga, January 2008. See also Peter Chalk, Angel Rabasa, William Rosenau and Leanne Piggott, *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia: A Net Assessment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 52.

7 Personal interview, Western official, Manila, June 2009.

8 Personal interviews, AFP and PNP officials, Manila, June 2009.

9 Personal interviews, Colombian police officials, Bogota, March 2009.

### Moro Islamic Liberation Front

As of April 2009, the MILF's overall strength remained at levels on par with those of 2007-2008. According to the AFP, the group could count on 11,600 members equipped with around 7,700 weapons.<sup>10</sup> The overwhelming majority of the MILF believe that a final peace settlement and autonomous rule in Mindanao is still possible; indeed, in June 2009 the Front's political spokesman, Ghazali Jaafar, specifically described the peace process environment as "getting better," confirmed that the group accepted the government's disarmament, demobilization and reintegration policy and voiced hope that negotiations would resume soon.<sup>11</sup>

The rejectionist faction within the MILF remains at 30%, or approximately 3,400 of the group's total membership. It presents a challenge to any peace deal. The mainstream elements cooperating with the government, however, will likely inhibit any splinter faction's ability to disrupt a final settlement.<sup>12</sup> Obviously the rejectionists will need to be monitored—3,400 militants could cause considerable instability—although with the mainstream of the MILF cooperating, they will have less latitude to engage in disruptive attacks than they otherwise might enjoy.

As with the ASG, there are also signs of an increasing criminal element creeping into the Front's activities. The MILF's current budget is estimated to be in the vicinity of Ps107 million (approximately \$2.2 million), of which Ps100.8 million (approximately \$2.1 million) comes from extortion.<sup>13</sup> As in the case of the ASG, it is more manageable to deal with an economically-motivated group than one driven by strict ideological convictions. The MILF's increase in criminal activity could work to the direct advantage of the AFP.

10 Personal interviews, AFP officials, Manila, June 2009.

11 "Mindanao: Peace Process Getting Better: MILF," *Sun Star*, March 9, 2009.

12 Personal interviews, AFP and PNP officials, Manila, June 2009. See also Chalk et al., pp. 40-42.

13 Personal interviews, AFP officials and Philippine analysts, Manila, June 2009.

### New People's Army

In June 2009, the AFP estimated the NPA's combined strength to be 4,874 guerrillas organized across approximately 60 fronts. This is the lowest number of guerrillas since the mid-1980s.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the organization is finding it difficult to procure advanced weaponry, which is greatly hindering its ability to undertake concerted operations against the military.<sup>15</sup> Reflective of these dynamics, the majority of the communist campaign now takes the form of political (as opposed to military)

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struggle, consuming as much as 90% of the movement's overall resources.<sup>16</sup> In broad terms, the main priorities appear to be solidifying popular support, generating income and de-legitimizing the Philippine state (through the so-called “oust Arroyo campaign”).<sup>17</sup>

Problematically for the NPA, however, its political wings—the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP, which is illegal) and the National Democratic Front (NDF, which is legal)—are encountering significant challenges in attracting high-caliber recruits from traditional hubs such as the University of the Philippines (UP), Ateneo de Manila and Delasalle. Academics in Manila believe these difficulties reflect dramatic reductions in tuition assistance packages to the extent that it is now only the middle and upper classes who can afford to attend these institutions—

14 “Current NPA Strength Down to Lowest Level Since the ‘80s,” *Philippine Star*, June 28, 2009.

15 Personal interview, Philippine academic, June 2009.

16 Personal interviews, PNP officials and Philippine academics, June 2009.

17 Personal interviews, PNP officials, Manila, June 2009. See also Chalk et al., p. 86.

neither of which have a natural affinity to the communist message. As a result, recruitment efforts have increasingly been focused on second- and third-tier universities, leading to an influx of cadres who are not as gifted in terms of effectively convincing local populations to support the CPP/NDF agenda. The inevitable consequence has been a gradual but growing reduction in the communist base.<sup>18</sup>

The AFP asserts that it is on track to achieve a strategic victory over the NPA by 2010—meaning a 75% reduction in the group's current strength and influence. Although independent commentators question the ability of the army to meet this target on the basis of its current tempo—at least 50 guerrilla fronts would have to be fully dismantled in less than a year—they believe that it could be achieved by 2011.<sup>19</sup> The larger problem may be how to effectively reintegrate those who agree to enter into government-sponsored amnesty programs and ensure that they have sufficient opportunity to support their livelihood in a civilian context.<sup>20</sup> With the current global economic downturn having a significant negative impact on the Philippines, Manila's ability to successfully support the transition of NPA fighters, possibly at the same time as having to manage a similar process with regard to the MILF, cannot be taken for granted.

### U.S. Security Assistance to the Philippines

In rough terms, most U.S. security aid to the Philippines is allocated to the AFP while Australian support focuses primarily on the PNP. In both cases, however, the majority of assistance is directed toward facilitating the campaign against the ASG. This disposition reflects Manila's general reluctance to accept external help in mitigating the NPA threat—which it regards as a purely domestic issue—and awareness that any such involvement would significantly complicate the ongoing peace process with the MILF.

18 Personal interview, Philippine academic, Manila, June 2009.

19 Personal interviews, Philippine analysts and academics, Manila, June 2009.

20 Under the program, the government offers every NPA cadre who surrenders up to Ps50,000 (\$1,040) for the return of their weapons and a single cash payment of Ps20,000 (\$415) to help support their livelihood.

Washington's support to the AFP continues to be channeled through the Joint United States Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG) and is primarily aimed at supporting the Philippine's own initiatives to foster a holistic, all of government (AOG) approach to its counterterrorism strategies.<sup>21</sup> The general consensus is that these efforts have borne considerable dividends in not only balancing kinetic and non-kinetic responses to the ASG threat, but also institutionalizing responses that have been able to draw on the combined expertise of the governmental, private sector, civil and military communities.<sup>22</sup>

Through these endeavors, the AFP has been able to win over large (but not all) segments of local populations in terrorist “hot spots.” Furthermore, by employing Moro Muslims as the “eyes and ears” of the security forces, the AFP has substantially augmented the scope of its own surveillance efforts on the ground. Indeed, the Philippine model has been so successful that officials are now looking at whether it could be replicated in other conflict zones. Although there are no active discussions yet, one place where it could have particular relevance is southern Thailand.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the gains made in the AFP's counterterrorism strategy, several problems remain. First, comparatively little effort has been devoted to developing an overall strategy that is directed against militant groups as a whole. The emphasis has rather been on intensifying local offensives in particular areas. The utility of such an approach makes little sense given the army's limited resources and the fact that degrees of tactical cooperation are believed to take place between the ASG and renegade MILF commands, as well as between Moro and communist militants (in areas where they operate in close proximity to each other).

21 For an in-depth look at the U.S.-Philippine security assistance relationship, see Peter Chalk, “U.S. Security Assistance to Philippines: A Success Story Against Terrorism,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:3 (2008).

22 Personal interviews, AFP and Western officials, Manila, June 2009.

23 Personal interview, Western official, Manila, June 2009.

Second, insufficient focus has been given to improving civil local governance comprehensively. This is a significant gap as perceptions of administrative abuse are one of the main catalysts for joining the ASG (as well as the MILF and NPA).

Third, the army remains the lead agency in terms of counterterrorism. This is not only further stretching already limited resources, but it is forcing the military to undertake roles for which they are not trained (a fact that has been very apparent in the failure to ensure the sanctity of forensic evidence at crime scenes).

Finally, the balanced AOG approach to counterterrorism is not shared by all AFP senior officers, a number of whom continue to insist on the primacy of hard responses despite the adverse effect these can have in terms of winning “hearts and minds.”<sup>24</sup>

#### Australian Security Assistance to the Philippines

The bulk of Australia’s security assistance has been directed toward the police. The main emphasis has been on capacity building in critical areas such as crime scene management, strategic reporting, intelligence collection, forensic evidence gathering and improvised explosive device “signature-track” analysis. Australia’s Federal Police has allocated roughly A\$5.5 million (\$4.6 million) to these various endeavors since 2006, in addition to helping establish a dedicated bomb data center and integrated case management system.<sup>25</sup>

There are definite indications that the PNP is making progress in these areas. According to Western officials, the police force has developed an enhanced ability to think strategically and is now benefiting from the input and direction of some competent officers. Moreover, a number of fairly innovative structural ideas have been forthcoming. One of the more notable comes from the current PNP director general who intends to make Mindanao the center of terrorism intelligence collection and analysis. His

<sup>24</sup> Personal interviews, Philippine analysts and academics, Manila, June 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Personal interviews, Australian officials, Manila, June 2009 and Canberra, July 2009.

concept envisages establishing satellite data reporting stations that transmit raw intelligence to a dedicated hub where it can be assessed, analyzed and disseminated back to the originating source. If enacted, this will avail an effective two-way information conduit for counterterrorism intelligence and information. Australian officials laude these efforts and generally believe they are indicative of a bureaucratic cultural context that is now highly receptive to institutional force development and progress.<sup>26</sup>

One significant limiting factor in police reform, however, is the issue of size. Roughly 96% percent of the PNP’s budget is allocated on salaries. This leaves little money to underwrite substantive areas of police work such as forensics, investigative techniques and technological platforms. Australia would like to reduce this percentage ratio to around 80%, arguing that this would provide much greater leeway for its own training and support initiatives to take root.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the basic issue of resources, Australian officials identify several areas where the PNP’s counterterrorism effectiveness could be usefully enhanced, namely:

- a) Improving coordination of effort—understanding how the actions of one agency will impact on the actions of another;
- b) Dealing with corruption and kickback, which is endemic across the force;
- c) Increasing the professionalism of the force, especially in terms of respect for human rights;
- d) Reducing duplicity of effort;
- e) Developing appropriate legislative tools for prosecuting terrorists.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Personal interviews, Australian officials, Manila, June 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Personal interviews, Australian officials, Manila, June 2009 and Canberra, July 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Personal interviews, Australian officials, June 2009. Although the country has an anti-terrorism law in the guise of the Human Security Act (HSA, which was passed in 2008), the legislation has only been used once on account of the highly draconian penalties for alleged misuse of the statute. Of particular note is the provision that should someone be detained under the HSA subsequently be found “not guilty,” liability and responsibility for financial compensation falls to the individual arresting officer(s) concerned rather than institutionally to the PNP as an organization in its own right.

#### Conclusion

The Philippine terrorist environment appears manageable. The ASG has been reduced to isolated pockets of militants scattered across the outlying islands of Mindanao with no apparent leader or unified ideological agenda to tie the group together. The MILF’s mainstream continues to insist that it is prepared to engage Manila in peace talks, and there has been no substantial increase in the size of the so-called “renegade commands” despite periodic clashes

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with the military throughout 2009. Finally, the NPA’s strength is at its lowest level since the 1980s, while its political wings—the CPP and NDF—find it increasingly difficult to build a solid mass base. Complementing these positive developments are ongoing improvements in the Philippine military and law enforcement communities, which despite various shortfalls appear to be making progress operationally, organizationally and doctrinally.

Both the United States and Australia have been active in supplying security assistance to the Philippines, and there is little doubt that this support has had a meaningful impact on the AFP and PNP. Future challenges will lie in sustaining and fully institutionalizing the progress achieved thus far and moving to mitigate enduring problems such as corruption.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to the effective translation of counterterrorism assistance into meaningful action lies with the domestic environment of the Philippines itself. Internal political developments within the state are such

that sudden, unexpected shocks to the system are not only possible (indeed, the country is presently grappling with and highly divided over the question of constitutional change<sup>29</sup>), but are also able to quickly and decisively unravel reform attempts in the security sector. As one Western official remarked: “The Philippines is on a knife edge and I don’t think either Washington or Canberra fully appreciate how fragile the domestic situation has become.”<sup>30</sup> The continued success of security assistance programs cannot be considered a given under these circumstances.

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<sup>29</sup> Arroyo is presently seeking to change the Philippine constitution, arguing, in part, that this is necessary to meet Moro demands on ancestral domain—the main sticking point hindering the current peace process with the MILF. Critics, however, charge that the real intention is to abrogate presidential term limits so that she can continue in office after 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview, Western official, Manila, June 2009.