

The Philippines Chips Away at the Abu Sayyaf Group's Strength

By Zachary Abuza

SINCE THE LAUNCH of Operation Ultimatum in August 2006, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have scored significant victories against the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).¹ In the past four months, there has been a renewed intensity against the ASG. In mid-March 2010, Philippine President Maria Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo dispatched 700 additional Philippine Marines and Ranger Scouts as well as a naval task force to the Sulu archipelago to reinforce the existing deployments. Although the ASG's capabilities and resources have waned, it has nonetheless regained a foothold in Basilan and on the Zamboanga peninsula in addition to their stronghold in Sulu. The ASG's coordinated April 13, 2010 raid on Isabela City, the capital of Basilan, that left 11 dead affirmed that the ASG remains a threat to Philippine peace and security. This article traces the evolution of the ASG, shows how the group remains a weakened organization, identifies its current leadership and finally examines some of its losses on the international front.

Evolution of the ASG

The Abu Sayyaf Group was founded by Abdurajak Janjalani, a veteran of the Afghan mujahidin, in 1991, allegedly with al-Qa`ida seed money. From 1991-1996, the group's operations were sectarian in focus, targeting Christian churches, missionaries and priests. Following the loss of support from al-Qa`ida in 1995—when Muhammad Jamal Khalifah was not allowed to return to the Philippines following his implication in Ramzi Yousef's Operation Bojinka plot to destroy multiple commercial airliners—and the 1998 killing of Janjalani in a shootout with police, the group degenerated into a kidnap-for-ransom gang, gaining

1 A number of the ASG's top commanders have been neutralized as a result of the operation. Operation Ultimatum began on August 1, 2006, after previous offensives lost intensity, and the ASG began to regroup in sizeable numbers. The offensive was unprecedented in its immediate success and the AFP's ability to sustain it over an extended period of time.

notoriety for brazen raids on Philippine and Malaysian dive resorts and the taking of Western hostages.² These included the April 2000 raid on the Malaysian island of Sipadan, and the May 2001 raid on the Philippine resort island of Palawan; together, the two attacks netted approximately 50 foreign hostages.³ Between 2000 and 2001, the ASG abducted approximately 140 hostages including school children, teachers, priests and Western tourists; 16 of those hostages were killed.⁴

Bolstered by U.S. training and assistance, the AFP scored some early successes, including the neutralization of ASG leaders Abu Sabaya and Ghalib Andang.⁵ By 2004, however, most kidnappings had ceased, and in conjunction with members of the Indonesian-based terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiya (JI), the group was once again involved in terrorism, including the February 2004 bombing of a Superferry in Manila harbor that killed 116 people.⁶ Between 2004 and 2007, the few kidnappings resulted in executions, not ransoms, including the 2007 beheadings of six workers in Jolo who were working on a U.S.-funded road project.⁷

Before 2004, the ASG had few contacts with other militant groups in the region and in the Philippines. That began to change in 2003, when Indonesian and Malaysian militants sought ASG assistance in crossing the Sulu archipelago into Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) camps in Mindanao. By 2004, JI members were embedded with ASG units. While the MILF stated that they had no ties to the ASG, arguing that the ASG's campaigns of kidnapping were "un-Islamic," the

2 For details on Operation Bojinka, see Raymond Bonner and Benjamin Weiser, "Echoes of Early Design to Use Chemicals to Blow Up Airliners," *New York Times*, August 11, 2006.

3 "Abu Sayyaf Kidnappings, Bombings and Other Attacks," GMA News.tv, August 23, 2007.

4 These figures are drawn from the author's own research.

5 Sabaya and Andang were two of the most notorious kidnapers in the late 1990s, responsible for the Sipidan and Palawan raids.

6 Simon Elegant, "The Return of Abu Sayyaf," *Time Magazine*, August 23, 2004.

7 Paul Alexander, "Philippine Army Vowed to Crash Abu Sayyaf Militants after Beheadings," Associated Press, April 20, 2007.

MILF worked closely with the ASG, employing them in bombing campaigns to give the MILF a degree of plausible deniability.⁸ More importantly, ties to the ASG gave the MILF a beachhead in the Tausig-dominated Sulu archipelago and began to undermine the Moro National Liberation Front's (MNLF) hold in the region. Although the MILF remains overwhelmingly an ethnic Maguindanao and Maranao organization, it always sought to challenge its rival Tausig-dominated organization.

Re-Degeneration

The sustained AFP offensive against the ASG that began in August 2006 led to the death of the group's commander, Khadaffy Janjalani (the founder's younger brother) in September 2006 and then Abu Solaiman⁹ in January 2007. The ASG never recovered from the losses of Janjalani and Solaiman. Although the ASG was bolstered by an infusion of new combatants when disaffected members of the MNLF, under the leadership of Habier Malik, joined with the ASG in March 2007, any cohesion that the ASG was starting to display started to unravel. Spread across the Sulu archipelago from Zamboanga to Tawi-Tawi, the ASG broke down once again into autonomous units with no noticeable central command and control. Short on funds and leadership, the individual units reverted to kidnapping for ransom beginning in the second half of 2007. The year 2008 saw more than 55 kidnappings, most of which resulted in releases after ransoms were paid.¹⁰

The rate of kidnappings declined to roughly 40 people in 2009.¹¹ Nevertheless, four people were beheaded when ransoms were not paid. The second half of 2009 saw an uptick in bombings. There were nine bombings, including one in Zamboanga that killed six, and a bombing in Jolo that killed two U.S. military personnel.¹² In

8 Zachary Abuza, "Balik Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf Group," Institute for Security Studies Monograph No. 625, September 2005.

9 Jainal Antel Sali (also known as Abu Solaiman) was killed in January 2007. He was one of the top military commanders for the ASG.

10 These figures are drawn from the author's own research.

11 Ibid.

12 For details on the deaths of the two U.S. soldiers, see "2 U.S. Soldiers Killed in Philippines Bomb Blast," CNN,

addition, 12 bombs were found hidden on a ferry in July 2009, indicating the ASG's continued interest in crippling the country's maritime infrastructure.¹³ Perhaps the only reason that more bombings did not occur was a result of the government's April 2009 seizure of an enormous cache of bomb-making materials.¹⁴

The first quarter of 2010 has likewise seen a precipitous drop in kidnappings and bombings.¹⁵ In part, these declines can be explained by more frequent and costly encounters with the AFP.

Current Leadership

On February 21, 2010, the most notorious ASG leader still at large, Albader Parad, was killed in an encounter in Sulu.¹⁶ It was the most recent setback to the group's leadership continuity. As Philippine Lieutenant General Ben Dolorfino explained, "This will be a big blow to the Abu Sayyaf."¹⁷ The most senior ASG commander, the one-armed Radullan Sahiron, has not been seen since a 2008 encounter, in which the AFP claimed to have wounded him. Other Jolo-based commanders include Umbra Jumandail, known as Dr. Abu Pula, and Isnilon Hapilon.

Philippine military and intelligence sources indicate that Khair Mundus has emerged as the leader of the Basilan-based ASG faction. Mundus was arrested by Philippine authorities in 2004 for his role in funneling foreign donations to the ASG and the MILF, but he escaped from a jail in 2007. Authorities are concerned that he continues to maintain ties to foreign donors in the

Middle East as well as in Malaysia.¹⁸ Beneath Mundus is his deputy, Puruji Indama, a young commander implicated in the beheadings of 10 Marines in July 2007 and the February 2010 massacre of civilians on Basilan.¹⁹

Philippine authorities seem buoyed by the death of Parad and the dearth of known leaders or authority figures. "There are no young leaders emerging," Dolorfino assured.²⁰ Another military leader contended that all command and control had broken down. "There is no such coordination among all the groups," explained Marine commandant Major General Juancho Sabban. "The Basilan group has no contact with the Sulu group or with the Tawi-Tawi group. In effect, we have isolated each group and eventually piece by piece we will be able to neutralize these groups."²¹

In addition to killing Albadar Parad, Philippine authorities have arrested a number of other militants, either ASG or people affiliated with the Indonesian-based JI. In early March 2010, authorities arrested three people in metro Manila for plotting a bombing for the ASG.²² Bomb-making materials including detonating cords and blasting caps were recovered in the raid.²³ Raids in March against two jungle camps led to seizures of bomb-making materials, as well as the deaths of 13 ASG militants. In recent months, Philippine authorities have captured a number of ASG militants linked to the spectacular kidnappings of 2000-2001.²⁴

There have also been some setbacks. In December 2009, a jailbreak on Basilan led to 31 ASG and MILF members escaping.²⁵ On February 26, 2010, ASG

gunmen attacked the town of Maluso on Basilan Island, killing a militiaman and 10 civilians.²⁶ The recent April 13 assault on the Christian-majority capital city of Basilan, Isabela, was well-coordinated, and exposed significant weaknesses among government forces.²⁷ A small team of ASG disguised as soldiers was able to detonate three bombs in the city, followed by automatic weapons fire. The attack left 11 dead, including three marines.²⁸

Regardless of these setbacks, the ASG appears weakened by the government's renewed offensives and leadership decapitations.

The International Front

While the ASG is clearly weakened at home, there have been other developments on the international front that are harder to evaluate in terms of the significance for the ASG's capabilities.

On January 14, 2010, Pakistan authorities announced that Abdulbasit Usman was killed in a U.S. drone attack in Waziristan along the Afghan-Pakistan border.²⁹ The attack on a compound used by Haqqani network extremists left 11 others of various nationalities dead.³⁰ If true, it would be a significant killing. Usman's affiliations are often disputed. He has been alleged to have been a member of the MILF, the terrorist group JI, the ASG, or as an independent gun for hire. There has never been consensus, but what is clear is that he worked at times as a bomber and trainer for both the ASG and MILF, although the latter insists that he was expelled from the group. Regardless of his affiliation, how and why a man responsible for a string of bombings in the southern Philippines went to Pakistan is unclear. It is not known whether he was sent for advanced training in bomb-making, if he was training other Southeast Asians in

October 2, 2009.

13 Arnell Ozaeta, "12 Bombs Found on Lucena Ferry," *Philippine Star*, July 27, 2009.

14 The materiel included 700 kilograms of ammonium nitrate, 8,000 blasting caps, and 13 rolls of detonating cord. For details, see "Philippine Troops Seize Large Amount of Explosives," Associated Press, April 23, 2009.

15 The abduction of an elderly Swiss man on April 4 was an exception. For details, see Jocelyn Uy and Julie Alipala, "Swiss-Filipino Kidnap Pinned on Abu Sayyaf," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 6, 2010.

16 Simon Montlake, "Philippines Kills Abu Sayyaf Most-Wanted Albader Parad," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 22, 2010.

17 "AFP Expects New Abu Sayyaf Leader to Emerge," *GMA News.tv*, February 23, 2010.

18 "Militant with Money Links Leads Abu Sayyaf Faction," Associated Press, March 14, 2010.

19 "Philippine Raid Leaves Several Dead," *al-Jazeera*, February 27, 2010.

20 "Parad's Killing Cripples Abu Sayyaf-AFP General," *GMA News.tv*, February 22, 2010.

21 "Military Sees Advances vs Terror Group," *ABS-CBN*, March 2, 2010.

22 "3 Suspected Abu Sayyaf Bombers Arrested in Taguig," *GMA News.tv*, March 3, 2010.

23 *Ibid.*

24 These include Rasul Barro, Jumadail Arad (known as Abu Hurayra), Mubin Sakandal and Mujibar Alih Amon.

25 "Islamists Flee Philippines Prison After Militants' Raid," *BBC*, December 13, 2009.

26 Cecilia Yap and Katrina Nicholas, "Abu Sayyaf Attacks Southern Philippine Town, Kills 11," *Bloomberg*, February 26, 2010.

27 "Clashes Kill 12 in Philippines," Associated Press, April 14, 2010; "Behind the Raid," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 16, 2010.

28 Jim Gomez, "Filipino Troops Chase Militants After Deadly Raid," Associated Press, April 14, 2010.

29 "Filipino Bomb Expert Killed by American Missile in Pakistan," *GMA News.tv*, January 21, 2010.

30 *Ibid.*

Afghan or Pakistani camps, or whether he was simply trying to re-energize links between South and Southeast Asian militant groups.

Moreover, it is not even clear whether Usman was killed in the strike. One senior Philippine military commander, citing interrogations of three militant suspects arrested on March 3, asserted that Usman was still in Mindanao, and that Pakistan's authorities had recovered the body of another Southeast Asian.³¹

The second development was the March 9, 2010 death of Dulmatin, an Indonesian member of JI, killed in a shootout in a Jakarta internet cafe.³² Dulmatin, who

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was wanted for his role in the 2002 Bali bombing that killed 202 people, arrived in the southern Philippines in 2003. He and compatriot Umar Patek were given sanctuary in MILF camps until late 2004 when their presence was impacting the MILF's peace talks with the government and bringing to light the MILF's continued ties with JI. The two were forced out of MILF territory and sought refuge with the ASG in Sulu.

It is not clear when Dulmatin—and possibly Umar Patek—slipped back into Indonesia. Indonesian counterterrorism police learned of their presence following a February 22 raid of a terrorist training camp in the western-most province of Aceh. There is some speculation that Dulmatin's return was necessitated by the September 2009 death of JI's

Noordin Mohamed Top, which created a leadership vacuum, especially among the hard line faction that articulates a strategy focused on Western targets. Noordin Top had established a breakaway group, al-Qa`ida in the Malay Archipelago, to signal his dissatisfaction of the proponents within JI of a strategy of sectarian bloodletting. The training camp in Aceh was ostensibly run by “al-Qa`ida in Aceh,” and in a recruitment video put online, the members actually denigrate JI leaders as being too moderate.³³ The Afghan-trained Dulmatin, who had front line experience in the southern Philippines against the U.S. military, was an obvious choice to succeed Noordin Mohamed Top. Again, there is no hard evidence that Umar Patek, another veteran of the Afghan jihad, is in Indonesia, but there is considerable suspicion that he accompanied his compatriot to fill the leadership void.

There is an important logic to this. For JI/al-Qa`ida in the Malay Archipelago or al-Qa`ida in Aceh to regroup, it is essential that they have leaders with the pedestal of having “joined the caravan” in Afghanistan, personal contacts with militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the trust and the respect of South Asians and Arab militants who tend to be condescending toward Southeast Asian Muslims. Ties to militant groups in South Asia also open new channels of funding to the Southeast Asian organizations, and on occasion offer new training possibilities.³⁴

The third international development involves an Indonesian national, Sanusi, believed to be a JI trainer of the MILF and ASG. In mid-March, Indonesia formally requested that Philippine authorities track down Sanusi who was implicated in sectarian violence in Poso, Sulawesi, including the beheadings of three schoolgirls in 2007.³⁵ Philippine intelligence officials believe that Sanusi has emerged as one of the leaders of JI in the southern Philippines, along

with Malaysian national Zulkifli bin-Hir (known as Marwan). The continued operational inter-connectedness of JI, ASG and the MILF continues to pose analytical questions.

Conclusion

The Philippine military is lodging successes against the ASG. Weakened and leaderless, the ASG has re-degenerated back into a kidnapping for ransom gang, with only occasional forays into jihadist violence. Nevertheless, the group cannot be discounted as a threat. The Philippine military does not appear to have the capacity nor the will to finish the job militarily, and the government's refusal to develop a holistic peace process in the southern Philippines that has full support from both the MILF and MNLF will continue to support the ASG's ranks. MILF commanders in Basilan, in particular, continue to operate alongside ASG units, while disaffected ethnic Tausigs, once loyal to the MNLF, are joining the ASG, giving them a continued lease on life.³⁶ Regardless of the outcome of the May 2010 presidential election, it will be at least a year before the new president is able to restart the peace process in earnest, fueling continued Muslim resentment toward Manila. Sadly, the presidential candidates have not shown much willingness to resolve the conflicts in Mindanao nor have they offered an indication that they will put forward bold new policies to rekindle the peace process.

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31 “Basit Usman Alive, Hiding in Mindanao,” ABS-CBN, March 5, 2010.

32 Sara Schonhardt, “Indonesia Says Killed Leading Militant Dulmatin,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 10, 2010.

33 Niniek Karmini and Chris Brummitt, “Indonesian Militants Recruit Fighters in Video,” Associated Press, March 16, 2010.

34 See, for example, Chris Brummitt, “Web Chats Point to al-Qaida's Indonesian Links,” Associated Press, April 5, 2010.

35 “Philippine Hunts Indonesian Training Militants,” GMANews.tv, March 20, 2010.

36 Julie Alipala and Christine Avedaño, “14 Marines Killed; 10 Were Beheaded: MILF, Abu Join Forces in Basilan Ambush,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 12, 2007.