

Hostage standoff continues in war torn and impoverished southern Philippines

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The plight of 21 hostages held for more than two weeks on the Filipino island of Jolo has focused international media attention on the situation in the southern Philippines. The captives, reportedly sick and exhausted, include tourists from Germany, France, South Africa, Finland and Lebanon as well as resort workers from Malaysia and the Philippines. They were seized by Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas on April 23 from the Malaysian diving resort of Sipadan and taken to Jolo by sea.

The guerrilla group known as Abu Sayyaf (Father of the Sword) has threatened to kill the hostages if its demand for \$2.4 million in ransom is not met. Up to 2,000 government troops including special forces units have been dispatched to the island and last week were engaged in a tense standoff after encircling the guerrilla camp. An Abu Sayyaf spokesman warned that two of the hostages would be beheaded if government troops did not pull back.

President Joseph Estrada has insisted that the government will not pay the ransom but is under pressure from European governments to allow an international mediator to talk with the guerrillas. Former NATO head Javier Solana was due to arrive in the Philippines yesterday. Estrada has flown to the southern island of Mindanao and has indicated that he may consider guerrilla demands to replace government negotiator Nur Misuari and provide money for development projects in the area. Misuari is chairman of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao that was established when the MNLF signed a peace deal with the government in 1996.

Malaysia is also putting pressure on Estrada indicating that it wants to be involved in negotiations and may be prepared to pay for the release of the hostages. It is also worth noting the response of the Mahathir government to the seizure of the hostages from the Malaysian resort. According to a report in the *Manila Bulletin*, Malaysian authorities arrested more than 1,000 Filipinos living near the resort and has already deported at least 761 on suspicion of being involved in the kidnapping.

The raid came as the army was closing in on another Abu Sayyaf group on the neighbouring island of Basilan where they were holding 27 teachers and children from Christian schools. These hostages were seized and used as a human shield during a raid on March 20 on a local army detachment. As the military moved in, the guerrillas beheaded two of the male teachers and last week killed a priest and three other teachers. Fifteen of the hostages were freed during a clash with the guerrillas but eight are still being held. In this case, the demands of the Abu Sayyaf group include the release of Ramzi Abdel Yousef, imprisoned in the US for allegedly masterminding the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York.

The actions of Abu Sayyaf will do nothing for the people of the southern Philippines other than allow the government to drive a wedge between Muslims and Christians and to justify a new round of military repression throughout the area. But while the group's terrorist methods must be condemned, it is also necessary to understand the social and political conditions that have given rise to such desperate measures. For more than

three decades, a brutal civil war has raged in the poverty-stricken Muslim areas of the southern Philippines, claiming an estimated 120,000 lives.

In fact, there is every indication that the latest round of fighting on Mindanao and neighbouring islands, including the Jolo kidnappings, are the result of an attempt by President Estrada to bolster his dwindling public support by pushing for a military victory over the Islamic separatist guerrillas. The former film actor Estrada, who was elected in May 1998 on the populist slogan of "Erap [Buddy] for the poor," is enmeshed in a string of corruption scandals. His rating in the opinion polls has plummeted as the social divide between rich and poor has continued to widen as a result of his administration's economic policies.

Since the beginning of the year, the army has mounted a number of operations throughout the southern Philippines against guerrilla groups. In mid-February, eight army battalions waged an offensive over nine days in Maguindanao province to capture Camp Omar, a major stronghold of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the largest guerrilla group fighting the government. More than 300 guerrillas died in the fighting.

The army offensive reinforced the hard-line message delivered by Estrada during his lengthy visit to Mindanao from February 26 to March 2—the longest ever presidential tour of the region. He reiterated that the MILF and other Islamic separatist groups had until June 30 to accept a peace deal that falls short of their demand for an independent Islamic republic. Monsignor Hernando Coronel, a spokesman for the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, commented at the time: "We are saddened that President Estrada has ordered an intensification of conflict in Mindanao". Needless to say, talks between the MILF and the government in early March came to nothing.

Further fighting erupted on Mindanao in March. The MILF took over the town of Kauswagan on March 19 and held it for 12 hours before the army poured in 3,000 troops backed by tanks and helicopter gunships. MILF leaders said the seizure of the town had been provoked by a major army offensive against one of its strongholds in the area—Camp Bilal. "If we are pushed against the wall, we have no other resource but to fight back," MILF military chief Al Haj Murad warned.

Estrada visited the town soon after its recapture and boasted to a cheering crowd that "We will not spare any one of them [the MILF]". He told reporters: "We are seeking peace but we will not allow our enemies to take advantage of this. They should not make the mistake of repeating this because I have ordered the Armed Forces to go all out against these terrorists."

Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado made clear that the government had no intention of seriously negotiating with the MILF or any other group. "The only way to deal with a military problem is through a military solution and we will pursue the MILF to the end until its last soldier is killed," he said. According to the military, more than 400 guerrillas were killed during its operations and two MILF strongholds near Kauswagan—Camp Bilal and Camp Jack Mack—were overrun.

Further negotiations between the government and the MILF were due to

have taken place on May 2. But the MILF walked out of the talks claiming that the army was tightening the noose around another base—its Maguindanao headquarters, Camp Abubakar. Troops had moved into the area and launched air and ground attacks on hundreds of guerrillas who had allegedly set up roadblocks around the western boundary of Camp Abubakar. The MILF responded a week ago with a series of bomb attacks in local towns that left at least four people dead and dozens injured.

It is in this context that the kidnappings took place on Basilan and then from Malaysia. While the two guerrilla outfits are not formally linked or allied, the military pressure on the MILF will undoubtedly have been felt in areas controlled by Abu Sayyaf.

The term “Moro” derives from the time of Spanish colonisation and was used in a derogatory way to refer to the predominantly Muslim population in the southern Philippines. From the mid-16th to the end of the 19th century Spain subordinated most of the Filipino archipelago to its rule and converted most of the lowland population of Luzon and the Visayas to Christianity. But it was only able to establish a few outposts on Mindanao—the second largest island in the group—that continued to be dominated by a series of Islamic sultanates.

After taking colonial possession of the Philippines in the wake of its victory in the Spanish-American war of 1896-98, the US exploited the divisions between Christian and Muslim by forming an alliance with the Moro sultanates against the Filipino nationalist movement. Having “pacified” Luzon and the Visayas, the US then extended its military control over Mindanao and cultivated local Moro leaders as props for its colonial administration.

The Philippines was granted independence in 1946. But throughout the last five decades the Filipino bourgeoisie has proven completely incapable of resolving the ethnic and religious conflicts on Mindanao. In fact, the post-war governments greatly heightened tensions by encouraging large numbers of the rural poor to move to Mindanao without providing adequate services or infrastructure either for the local population or the newly arrived settlers. By the late 1960s, Muslims on Mindanao comprised just 25 percent of the total population as compared to 75 percent at the turn of the 20th century. Moreover much of the productive agricultural land had been taken over by corporations or settlers while logging companies had been granted huge timber concessions throughout the islands.

The growing conflicts led to the formation of private armies by both settler and local elites and brutal armed clashes. But it was not until the 1970s that the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was formed as a result of the growing grievances of Philippine Muslims. One incident in particular is still marked each year—the so-called Jabitah massacre in 1968, in which at least 28 young Muslim army recruits were killed by their superiors. The MNLF claims that the recruits had rebelled after being told they were being sent to Sabah to fight fellow Muslims.

The army, working together with paramilitary and private armies, has prosecuted a brutal and bloody war of suppression on the island for over three decades. According to government estimates, about 120,000 people have died in the war, more than a million have been made homeless and over 200,000 Muslims have fled to neighbouring Sabah in Malaysia. Fighting escalated after president Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law throughout the Philippines in 1972 following a Muslim uprising in Marawi City. The high point occurred in February 1972, when during a fierce two-day battle for Jolo, the military shelled the town from the sea, setting it ablaze and killing between 500 and 2,000 people.

Having failed to win a decisive military victory, Marcos negotiated with the MNLF with the assistance of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who had been providing assistance to the separatists. The resulting Tripoli agreement signed in 1976 provided limited autonomy to 13 of the 23 provinces in the southern Philippines but broke down in its implementation.

Fighting resumed and the MNLF began to fragment under the impact of the emergence of fundamentalist Islamic tendencies in the Middle East and elsewhere. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front, initially formed as a breakaway “New MNLF” in 1978 after the breakdown of the Tripoli agreement, drew most of its leadership from Islamic scholars with a traditional religious or aristocratic background. Whereas the MNLF had appealed to all “Moros” on a regional or ethnic basis regardless of their religion, the MILF defined itself as an Islamic organisation.

Abu Sayyaf was founded in the mid-1980s by the Islamic scholar Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani who advocated a “pure” form of Islam along the lines of Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan including disapproval of TV and movies, dancing and popular songs. Janjalani and other Abu Sayyaf members are believed to have fought in Afghanistan with the CIA-backed Islamic guerrillas against the Soviet-supported regime in Kabul. Several commentators have suggested that the group has degenerated into little more than a band of armed thugs after Janjalani was killed in a shootout with police in late 1998.

Following the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship in February 1986, Cory Aquino continued the war on Mindanao and at the same time sought to reach a new deal with the MNLF. The autonomy proposal contained in an Organic Act for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was, however, even more limited than the previous Tripoli agreement covering only four provinces instead of 13. It was not until September 1996 under president Fidel Ramos that a deal was finally concluded with the MNLF but rejected by the MILF and Abu Sayyaf.

The MNLF leader Nur Misuari now presides as governor over the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. But the agreement remains precarious. The MNLF is disgruntled because the ARMM administration lacks any real powers and has failed to receive the funds promised under the agreement. At a meeting on March 18 to commemorate the 1968 Jabitah massacre, MNLF leaders berated the Estrada government for its failure to fulfill promises under the peace accord and warned that it would be forced to take up arms again. Misuari commented: “I have no reasons to be satisfied. Even National Security Adviser Alexander Aguirre admitted that the initial implementation of the peace accord was a failure.”

The discontent in the southern Philippines is fueled by the appalling social conditions facing much of the population—the Muslim dominated areas are the most backward in what is one of the poorest countries in South East Asia. According to the 1997 *Philippine Human Development Report*, five of the predominantly Muslim provinces are among the six categorised as the worst off of the country's 74 provinces. An Education Department report for 1994 revealed that the proportion of people in the ARMM over 15 years of age who had not completed even one year of schooling was 27.8 percent as compared to a national average of 3.7 percent. Since then the region has been hard hit by both the Asian financial crisis and a severe drought in 1997-98.

For all his braggadocio about being “for the poor,” Estrada's policies, which are in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund to open up the country to foreign investment, will only exacerbate the social divide between rich and poor. While the demand for an Islamic state for Mindanao's Muslim population is a complete political and economic dead-end, the various Moro groupings are able to exploit widespread hostility, anger and desperation particularly among young people for their own purposes. The outcome has been the seizure of the hostages from Malaysia. This is not the first such incident and almost certainly will not be the last.



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