

Philippine President Arroyo takes hardline stance over hostage crisis

Keith Morgan, Peter Symonds
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The hardline stance taken by Philippine President Gloria Arroyo over the current hostage crisis on the southern island of Basilan has once again confirmed the rightwing and anti-democratic orientation of her administration. With the backing of the United States, she has repeatedly ruled out any negotiations with the hostage takers, dispatched 5,000 troops including special forces to the area, imposed a media blackout and threatened to prosecute anyone found assisting the Abu Sayyaf rebels.

Summing up her attitude last week, Arroyo pledged to wage a “long and bloody battle” against the Islamic extremists. “We will meet fire with fire, and more,” she said. “No ransom. No deal. No cease-fire. No suspension of the military operation.... The Abu Sayyaf is a plague on our race, a curse to their religion. They live by the draconian code of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. We have responded in kind.”

Arroyo has made clear that the fate of more than two dozen hostages comes a poor second to the immediate interests of Philippine capitalism. “We must address this decisively to show the world that we can protect our citizens, our visitors and our investors,” the president said. Noting the importance of the country’s \$2.5 billion tourist industry, she reassured big business that the kidnapping on Basilan was just “a blip”.

The response contrasts with that of her predecessor, Joseph Estrada, whom she ousted earlier in the year. When confronted with a similar Abu Sayyaf kidnapping last year, Estrada, who was by no means averse to playing the military tough guy, bowed to pressure from the European Union. With the assistance of Libya, he negotiated the release of hostages seized from a Malaysian resort in return for an estimated \$25 million in ransom.

The latest hostages were seized from the exclusive resort of Dos Palms on island of Palawan in an early morning raid on May 27. The heavily-armed Abu Sayyaf group travelled more than 500km by sea in a high-power motor launch from its base on Basilan, then abducted two local fishermen to act as guides, disarmed the resort guards and quickly rounded up a group of local and foreign tourists. Those taken were three Americans—a missionary couple, Martin and Gracia Burnham, and a businessman Guillermo Sobero—14 wealthy Filipino guests and three resort employees.

When news of the raid broke, Arroyo responded with an outburst on television ruling out any talks and vowing to wipe out Abu Sayyaf. She offered a \$2 million reward for information leading to their capture, saying: “I will finish what you started... Force against force, arms against arms, this is what you asked for when you challenged me, I will give it to you”. The rebels have threatened to execute their captives unless their demands are met.

Washington immediately backed Arroyo, dispatching an FBI anti-terrorist team to the Philippines, and has been providing satellite intelligence to the Philippine army. One unnamed US official has been quoted in *Time* magazine expressing concerns about Arroyo’s gung-ho attitude. “We need a more coordinated deliberate Philippine strategy, rather than running blindly through the jungle in hot pursuit, putting the hostages at maximum risk.”

The army now has at least 5,000 troops on Basilan—a mountainous, densely populated island just 50km long and 31km wide. Despite a media blackout on military operations, it has been confirmed that there has been at least one intense battle in early June in which the army appears to have come off second best. The army caught the Abu Sayyaf rebels and their hostages bathing near the town of Lamintan. After a battle that lasted most of the day, the group retreated to the town hospital and then managed to give the army the slip.

Although a number of the captives were freed, the army suffered heavy casualties and the rebels seized more hostages. According to the military, 16 soldiers died in the fighting and 52 were wounded while the guerrillas lost 11 dead and 29 wounded. Indicating concerns in ruling circles about Arroyo’s tactics, former Interior Secretary Rafael Alunan commented: “The jungle is so dense in there that if you lob in mortars, they just explode harmlessly high up in the forest canopy. And these Abu Sayyaf guys are unbelievable sharpshooters.”

The army complains that it lacks the equipment necessary to detect and defeat the guerrillas. “In operations like this, we need high-tech equipment,” military spokesman Brigadier General Edilberto Adan commented recently. The army is seeking helicopters, high-speed patrol boats and reconnaissance aircraft capable of taking high-resolution photographs.

Whatever the complaints of the military, however, there is no

doubt that Abu Sayyaf has a degree of local support. Sympathy for Abu Sayyaf and other Islamic separatist organisations in southern Mindanao has been engendered by the region's grinding poverty, discrimination against the predominantly Muslim population and the brutal way in which the army has conducted the war against these groups over the last two decades.

On June 4, two days after the military's failure at Lamintan, General Adan called for the introduction of martial law on the island in order to crack down on anyone assisting the guerrillas. "The Abu Sayyaf could be anywhere," he complained, arguing that the army had to have the power to deal with "terrorist bases"—in other words, areas of the island providing support to the Abu Sayyaf. While Arroyo did not immediately impose martial law, she did warn that anyone found assisting the rebels would be dealt with severely.

The call to impose martial law provoked protests in Manila. The Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP) and the human rights group Karapatan expressed fears that declaring martial law would lead to human rights abuses. The Ecumenical Movement for Justice and Peace (EMJP) commented: "Even if the military have not fired their guns at the innocent civilians, the unarmed populace of Sulu and Basilan will definitely be the first victims of a militarist state imposing a curfew, checkpoints, arbitrary arrests, blockades, limited movements and other military imposed restrictions".

There is already evidence of military atrocities. On June 10, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* revealed that the media had questioned General Adan over the killing of two suspected guerrillas captured on the outskirts of the Basilan capital Isabela. The general claimed that when nine suspects were being taken for questioning to the headquarters of the 24th Special Forces company, two of the guerrillas "tried to grab the firearms" of the soldiers. A back-up team at the rear "opened fire and killed them." In the commotion that followed four suspects escaped—two were later recaptured at the Basilan Hospital while being treated for bullet wounds. When reporters said that the shootings appeared to be a case of extrajudicial execution, Adan replied: "We just have to believe our troops that this was what happened."

Reports from the relatives paint an entirely different picture.

Maira Salim, mother of 16-year-old Salim, one of those detained, said that her son was only collecting timber. "But they were stopped by the soldiers who inspected their cargo. They were ordered to alight from the jeep. They were told they were being arrested," she said. "They were then asked to remove their shirts. My son told me that they were ordered to run and then the military started shooting them."

Vilduma Luma said his cousin Hadj Alih Lukman, one of those killed, was an ordinary civilian. "Why are they finding it difficult to find members of the Abu Sayyaf? Now they have committed a mistake, they are making it appear that the victims were Abu Sayyaf members. Do they have a conscience?" she

asked.

General Adan responded to publication of these accounts by blaming civilians for assisting the guerrillas and repeating his call for special emergency powers. According to a report this week, a staggering 50,000 people out of the island's total population of 300,000 have already been "displaced" as a result of the last three weeks of military operations.

When Arroyo visited Basilan on June 18 she had nothing but praise for army, handing out medals and money to injured personnel and calling on the soldiers to finish off Abu Sayyaf. She is under mounting pressure from powerful sections of big business, for whom the hostage crisis has been a disaster.

Benedict de Borja of Magnum International Securities commented recently: "We still have a never-ending Abu Sayyaf story and the thing about it is, it is wreaking havoc on the local currency." The peso fell to a five-month low of 52.30 this week.

Benjamin Chua, president of the Filipino-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, complained: "All of this criminal activity definitely is not conducive to economic growth." Noting that the hostage crisis came at a bad time for the economy, he said: "I would not go to the extent of saying that there has been capital flight, but the general international economic slowdown is also taking its toll on our economy."

The US credit rating agency Standard & Poor's added to the pressure on Arroyo warning on Wednesday that it may downgrade the country's credit rating "if the government fails to stabilise and reverse its increasing debt burden".

The president's crackdown on Abu Sayyaf is part of her attempt to demonstrate to international finance capital that she is in control and willing to implement whatever economic and other measures are demanded regardless of their popularity. Both the IMF and World Bank are insisting that her administration rein in the government budget and speed up the program of privatisation and economic restructuring.

The hostages are being left to take their own chances. The Abu Sayyaf group announced last week that it had beheaded one of the American hostages, Guillermo Sobero, but his body has yet to be found. Several other Filipino hostages, as well as two captured soldiers, have been killed. Three hostages were released but only after their families paid an estimated \$US200,000 to the guerrillas.



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