

Washington seizes on Philippines hostage deaths to extend military presence

Keith Morgan
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A botched rescue attempt by Philippine soldiers on June 7 has resulted in the deaths of two of the three hostages held by an Abu Sayyaf group in southern Mindanao for more than a year. American missionary Martin Burnham and Philippine nurse Ediborah Yap were killed in the shootout. Martin Burnham's wife Gracia received a gunshot wound to the leg and was ferried to hospital by helicopter. Four guerrillas were killed and seven Philippine soldiers wounded, four seriously.

The US and Philippine administrations have seized on the events to call for intensified military operations against Abu Sayyaf, one of several Islamic separatist groups operating in southern Mindanao. US President Bush reported that his Philippine counterpart Gloria Arroyo had pledged to "hold the terrorist group accountable for how they treated these Americans". Arroyo explained that Bush had promised "the continuing help of the United States in pushing our operations forward".

Last weekend Philippine Defence Secretary Angelo Reyes urged Washington to expand its joint military operations, saying: "We need more, and we need continued support and assistance from the United States in the fight against terrorism... [W]e have said from the start that the operation is much larger than the recovery of the Burnhams or even the capture of the top leaders of the Abu Sayyaf. The terrorist problem will be with us for many years to come." On Monday, US Ambassador Francis Riciardone concurred, declaring that US forces would remain in the Philippines to assist the army in ridding the country of the Abu Sayyaf.

Around 1,200 US troops began arriving on Basilan Island, an Abu Sayyaf stronghold, and nearby Zamboanga in January in what was billed as a limited six-month training exercise. Ostensibly the US soldiers, including special operations troops, were only in Zamboanga to school and advise local soldiers—a transparent ruse designed to circumvent the Philippine constitution, which bars foreign troops on its soil. The immediate objective was always to free the Burnhams but the unstated longer-term aim was to reestablish a permanent military presence in the former

American colony.

Everything about the conduct of last week's operation suggests that it was driven primarily by political considerations in Washington rather than any concern over the fate of the hostages. With the "training exercise" due to finish at the end of July, and Bush on the defensive over allegations that he had ignored warnings about the September 11 terrorist attacks, the US administration desperately needed results in its "war on terrorism"—even if that proved to be fatal to the Burnhams and Ediborah Yap.

The Philippine soldiers involved in the operation were elite Scout Rangers. They had been tracking a group of Abu Sayyaf guerrillas for several days in dense jungle near Zamboanga City on Mindanao—the main island in the southern Philippines. US intelligence reports, derived from sophisticated electronic and aerial surveillance of the area, alerted the army to the fact that the hostages had been moved from Basilan to Mindanao.

The army accounts of the actual shootout are very sketchy. The soldiers came on the group with the hostages almost by accident. Having initially lost contact with the Abu Sayyaf due to heavy rain, they picked up the trail while returning to base. Private Rene Mabilog, one of the wounded soldiers, explained: "When we saw that the two Americans were there, our [commanding officer] gave us the order to open fire. We opened fire and they fought back." A two-hour gun battle then ensued.

In its aftermath, both the Philippine and US military have been at pains to deny any responsibility for the deaths of the two hostages. Colonel Renato Padua, the commanding officer on the spot, was reported in the *Los Angeles Times* as saying that the guerrillas had used the hostages as human shields. "We tried to save Martin and Yap, but they were shot and mercilessly killed by the Abu Sayyaf," he said.

However, as the *Los Angeles Times* rather tentatively observed: "It was unclear from his account why the kidnappers shot the hostages if they were using them as shields. It also was unclear how Gracia Burnham was shot in the leg." Gracia Burnham later confirmed that her husband

had not been executed but was killed in the crossfire. In other words, it was just as likely the hostages were shot by army bullets as those of their Abu Sayyaf captors.

US military officials were quick to deny any involvement in the operation. Pentagon spokesman Lieutenant Commander Jeff Davies told the media: “Americans had no knowledge of any raid or shootout between the soldiers and the rebels until it was over.” Another spokeswoman, Navy Lieutenant Commander Barbara Burfeind declared: “We had no forces on the ground at the site of the firefight.”

Even if US soldiers were not on the spot, there is no doubt that the operation was monitored from start to finish by American forces in the area. Around 500 of the US personnel in the Philippines are “support troops” who run a hi-tech command and control centre in Zamboanga to follow Abu Sayyaf groups and provide sophisticated communications for Philippine troops and their US advisers.

Philippine national security advisor Riolo Golez confirmed that planning for “Operation Daybreak” had been underway since early May when it was first thought that the Burnhams had been moved from Basilan to Mindanao. “The Americans helped in planning, technical support, communications, intelligence sharing,” he said.

The operation began on May 27 and involved the Scout Rangers in a lengthy hunt for the guerrillas on the Zamboanga peninsula. An article in the *New York Times* on June 8 noted that the operation was “monitored by a team of American soldiers at a combined Philippine-American headquarters a few miles away”.

It is also possible that US Special Forces were directly involved in the operation. The Philippine administration had just lifted previous restrictions that, formally at least, had blocked US troops from patrolling with their local counterparts. Night missions were flown by US pilots as Philippine pilots had no night training. Moreover, a US helicopter flew in to pick up wounded Gracia Burnham.

Not only were the US military intimately involved in last week’s operation but its timing coincided with pressure in Washington for action to release the Burnhams. A comment appeared in the rightwing *Wall Street Journal* on May 28 criticising the failure to rescue the couple after a year in captivity and warning that “any US departure from the Philippines still seems premature.”

After reflecting on the value of closer US-Philippine military ties, the newspaper commented: “After the attacks of September 11, President Bush declared that violence against Americans would not be tolerated and would guaranteed reprisals. There are now some worries that the Bush Administration is softening that stance. Perhaps these worries are overdrawn. But pulling US troops out of the Philippines while Americans are still held captive, and

before Al Qaeda is defeated, sends the wrong message to terrorists around the world.”

It was as if the Bush administration had heard the master’s voice. A day later, on May 29, the US announced a \$US5 million reward for the capture of the Abu Sayyaf leaders.

The commander of US forces in the Pacific, Admiral Thomas Fargo, recommended that the Green Berets be allowed to join Philippine troops in active military operations at company level to provide “on the ground advice”. Philippines military officials supported him.

On June 4, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz visited the Philippines to assess the options for extending US involvement in counter-terrorism operations in the country. After meeting with Arroyo, US and Philippine officers, Wolfowitz announced, “I come away more an advocate for engagement in the Philippines, the stakes are large there and so are the problems.”

At the same time, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld lent his support for a more protracted US military presence in the Philippines, declaring: “You can improve the situation in one place by your presence, but unless you get the terrorists, you have not improved the situation net in the world. And there has been very little of getting terrorists in the Philippines thus far.”

An article in the *New York Times* on June 10 justified the failed attempt to rescue the Burnhams and at the same time pointed to the real reasons behind for the US military operation in the country. “The Bush Administration may have selected Abu Sayyaf because it looked like a chance to win a relatively easy battle early in the war. In a broader sense, the United States may have wanted to strengthen its military presence here, and across Southeast Asia, which declined after the cold war, especially after the American military left the two big overseas bases, Clark and Subic, in the Philippines a decade ago.”

Arroyo now has raised the possibility that other Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, might be called on to provide assistance in anti-terrorist operations. Rumsfeld has also pointed the necessity of broader operations throughout the region, all in the name of the “war against terrorism”.

Two hostages are dead but Washington has a pretext for extending its military presence in the Philippines and South East Asia. Those were the real motivations behind the push for last week’s fatal shootout near Zamboanga.



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