

# Philippine police crush jail rebellion

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Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo reacted with undisguised triumph on March 15 to the news that police paramilitary units had stormed the Camp Bagong Diwa prison and killed 22 prisoners involved in a jail uprising. Among the dead were three jailed leaders of the Islamist militia group Abu Sayyaf, who were awaiting trial on charges of terrorist bombings and kidnappings.

Arroyo seized on the bloody end to the prison siege to posture as tough on law-and-order and terrorism. In a radio address, she praised the police, claiming that “all peaceful means” to end the standoff had been exhausted. “[W]e will prevail in every battle for peace and freedom,” she declared, adding: “[T]errorism will never win in the Philippines”. Her press secretary Ignacio Bunye bluntly declared: “Thank God it is over ... the terrorists got what was coming to them.”

Interior Secretary Angelo Reyes, who personally directed the police operation, made similar remarks. “I hope this delivers a strong message that anybody who tries to do something like this in the future will be dealt with in the same fashion,” he warned. Clearly, the overriding consideration was not a peaceful end to the siege, but making an example out of the rebels.

The jail uprising began on the morning of March 14, reportedly when an inmate seized a guard’s gun. At least two guards and several prisoners were killed as inmates took control of sections of the prison. Authorities branded the rebellion a failed jailbreak, but there was little chance of escape. Police, including snipers and Special Action Force (SAF) units, surrounded the jail. It is not clear how many of the 425 inmates actively supported the rebellion.

While Arroyo and Reyes insisted that attempts were made to resolve the situation peacefully, the negotiations lasted just over 24 hours. Grievances included lengthy delays in bringing court cases, including those of the Abu Sayyaf leaders, and

allegations of physical mistreatment. At one point, a resolution appeared likely. The negotiators, who included Muslim parliamentarian Mujib Hataman, reached a deal for the surrender of the rebels in return for guarantees for their safety, speedy trials and a chance to put their case in the media.

The negotiations broke down, however, with the police claiming that the prisoners were stalling by asking for food. While discussions continued through the night, it appears that Reyes had already taken the decision to retake the jail. An article in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported that by 8 p.m. an assault plan was being prepared and the media were asked to clear the road leading to the main entrance.

The following morning, after a 15-minute ultimatum to surrender, several hundred heavily-armed police stormed into the compound, using tear gas and flash grenades. At least 22 inmates and one police officer died in the operation. All three Abu Sayyaf leaders—Galib Andang, alias Commander Robot; Alhamser Limbong, alias Commander Kosovo; and Nadjmi Sabdulla, alias Commander Global—were killed.

The dead prisoners were buried in a mass grave the following day at a nearby Muslim village. Several hundred relatives and supporters took part in the funeral, angrily shouting slogans and raising fists in the air. Speaking to Agence France Presse, one woman accused the police and guards of torturing prisoners. “They are still beating the survivors back in the prison,” she said.

Muslim leaders questioned the hasty decision to storm the jail. “[The crisis] should have been settled through peaceful dialogue. The police should have given it time, four days maybe, but it seemed they were in haste. If they waited, the [rebels] could have been weakened and eventually surrendered,” Bong Alonto, president of the Alliance of Metro Manila Muslim

Communities, commented.

“Although we have never approved of the Abu Sayyaf’s way of dealing with the situation, we are extremely saddened because the government attack resulted in the death of many innocent lives. The police should be able to account for the unidentified victims who were unfortunately killed,” Datu Amerol Gulam Ambiong, chairman of the Alliance of the Metro Manila Peace and Order Coordinating Council, told the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

Abu Sayyaf is one of several armed separatist militia operating in southern Mindanao, where poverty and repression of the region’s Muslim majority have spawned a bitter and protracted civil war that has claimed over 100,000 lives. Abu Sayyaf’s founder, Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, was one of a number of Filipinos who fought in the CIA-sponsored war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s and was critical of other groups for failing to take a more explicitly Islamist orientation.

Following the September 2001 attacks in the US, the Bush administration aggressively pushed for greater American military involvement in the Philippines. US military “trainers” were sent to southern Mindanao to work alongside Filipino military units hunting down Abu Sayyaf guerrillas holding two US citizens and a Filipino nurse hostage. While Arroyo enthusiastically backed the “global war on terrorism” as a means of gaining US financial and military assistance, her administration was forced to scale back plans for a large American military presence as a result of political opposition.

Like her predecessors, Arroyo is incapable of addressing the poverty and economic backwardness that afflicts millions of Filipinos either in southern Mindanao or elsewhere in the country. The rebellion at the Camp Bagong Diwa prison provided an opportunity to divert attention away her administration’s failures, to stir up anti-Muslim sentiment and to justify repressive police measures.



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