

Philippine hostage tragedy exposes tense international relations

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On August 23, a hostage crisis involving 21 Hong Kong tourists held captive by a disgruntled former police officer aboard a bus in Rizal Park in Manila unfolded on live television. After a 12-hour standoff, the Manila police engaged in a badly botched attempt to board the bus. Rolando Mendoza, the former 55-year-old senior inspector who had taken the tourists captive, shot and killed eight hostages before being killed himself by a police sniper. The event simultaneously exposed the rot at the core of the new Philippine government, the empty bluster of the news-as-entertainment media, and the taut and tenuous nature of relations between the Philippines and China.

Mendoza was a decorated Manila police commander, once named as one of the ten outstanding police officers of the Philippines. In January, he was removed from the police force for allegedly extorting 20,000 pesos (\$US440) from a hotel chef by forcing a package of methamphetamine down his throat. Such thuggery is part of the painful experience of the masses of ordinary working Filipinos.

For instance, in the days prior to the hostage crisis, video footage recorded on a cell phone in the police precinct of Tondo, and aired on national television, showed a naked detainee being tortured by the precinct chief and his men. They had tied a cord around his genitals and were tormenting him with it. Tondo is the working class port district of Manila.

The Philippines has seen more journalists murdered in the last 20 years than anywhere else in the world. It is considered more dangerous to be a journalist in the Philippines than in Iraq or Afghanistan. In the Philippines, most were killed by the police.

Despite his dismissal from the police force, Rolando Mendoza was allowed to retain an M-16 assault rifle, a 9 mm pistol and several grenades. On the morning of August 23, he walked into the walled city of Intramuros wearing his camouflage uniform and openly toting his weapons and grenades. At 10 am, he boarded a bus with large Chinese characters painted on the side and took the passengers hostage.

Intramuros was the Spanish colonial capital of the Philippines. Its thick stone walls housed the Spanish bureaucrats who lived as parasites in the colonial backwater. They grew rich through corrupt and illegal taxation on the entrepôt trade that flowed from China, with porcelain to Acapulco for Mexican silver and thence to Seville. Just outside the walls was Parian, the ghetto of the Chinese in the Philippines—mercantile mediators between the colonial state and the agricultural native population. The portion of Intramuros that survived the US carpet-bombing of Manila at the end of the Second World War has now become a major tourist destination; it was here that the bus of Chinese tourists stopped and Mendoza took them hostage.

Mendoza demanded that he be reinstated into the police force and the charges against him be dropped. The tragic events that followed had an element of the ridiculous. Police surrounded the bus and commenced a negotiation process that proceeded in fits and starts. No one seemed to be in charge. Television crews arrived, media celebrities jostled with each other to be nearest the bus.

There are two major rival television networks in the Philippines. From dubbed Mexican telenovelas to daytime game shows, where impoverished Filipinos are made to perform humiliating acts in the hope of winning a handful of money, every aspect of television programming is a deliberate attempt to trump the rival network. News programming is no different. News anchors shout the headlines, which are dominated by crime stories and movie star scandals. They conclude with a cloyingly saccharine charitable segment, where the network gives a pittance with great fanfare to some poor individual or institution. A hostage crisis meant ratings, so the networks fought during hours of live television coverage to capture the viewing public.

The television coverage revealed how inept the Manila SWAT team was. The main task of Filipino police is not the protection of human life, but of private property—a mission they often carry out through torture and murder. When confronted with a hostage crisis, they proved ill-equipped and badly

trained. They wandered around the bus, unarmed and without helmets. Mendoza came to the door of the bus and waved to the crowd, but nothing was done. An hour before the end of the ordeal, police attempted to assault the bus with a single hammer, pounding on the window of the back door, before beating a hasty retreat when this attempt failed.

At one point in the negotiations, Mendoza's brother, Gregorio, also a police officer, was brought to the scene with his wife and nephew. While he engaged in discussion, the police prepared for a tear gas assault. Gregorio approached the bus, ostensibly to make one last offer to his brother. He was armed with a sidearm. The other police officers present felt that he was joining his brother, and jumped him. For ten minutes, on live television, they wrestled with him and dragged him, screaming, away. His wife and nephew joined in the altercation.

The tourist bus was equipped with a television, and Mendoza watched the live broadcast with increasing agitation. Upon the arrest of his brother he began shooting hostages. The police panicked. They attacked the front windshield with their hammer, to no avail. They tried again at the back. Finally, as minutes past, they opened the emergency door of the bus and shot Mendoza. Eight tourists were dead, five wounded.

The incident quickly became a political crisis for President Benigno 'Noy' Aquino, who assumed office on June 30. It exposed his administration as inept, jeopardised his plans to double the size of the country's tourist industry and threatened crucial relations with Hong Kong and China.

During the hostage crisis, Aquino monitored the events through the live broadcasts on television. He told his staff that he would not be receiving any calls, except "extremely important ones". When Donald Tsang, chief executive of Hong Kong, called repeatedly for President Aquino, his calls were denied by presidential staff, who did not know who he was.

Aquino later issued an apology to the Hong Kong government for the events. In a desperate attempt at damage control, he sent a high-level delegation to Hong Kong to officially convey his regrets.

On August 26, however, Beijing refused to receive the delegation, comprised of Vice President Binay, Foreign Affairs Secretary Romulo, and presidential spokesperson Lacierda. Chinese officials demanded that the Philippines first complete its investigation of the events.

On a yearly average, 250,000 tourists come from Hong Kong to Manila. This year, tourism is expected to bring in about \$12 billion, or 6.9 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). In

response to the murder of the eight tourists on the bus, the Hong Kong government issued a 'black' travel alert, its highest level warning, against the Philippines—recommending that all Hong Kong subjects return from the Philippines. China issued a travel warning as well.

Among the tourist specialties of the Philippines are its malls. The usual tourist bus tour of Manila, such as that hijacked by Mendoza, will end at the sprawling Mall of Asia, the third largest mall in the world. The mall industry, and the vast new infrastructure of mass transit and reclaimed land which it requires, is undergirded by the inflow of Chinese capital.

Hong Kong is also important as an employer of Filipino labour. Around 150,000 Filipinos work in Hong Kong, nearly all as domestic workers. They cook the meals and care for the children of families not their own, while their own children see their mother for two weeks every two years. Fear of reprisals mounted among the overseas workers as their employers laid several off in the aftermath of the hostage crisis.

Nervousness about the impact of the hostage crisis is linked to concerns about the economy. The latest statistics released yesterday by the National Statistical Coordination Board showed that GDP had grown in the first half year by 7.9 percent. Industrial expansion, driven by domestic and international demand, and massive election spending, were major factors. The projections of HSBC and the Philippine government—4.5 to 5 percent for the remainder of the year—make clear that this growth is not sustainable.

In these conditions, the Philippines is increasingly dependent on China. An HSBC survey released yesterday of small- and medium-scale business in the Philippines found that China had displaced the United States as the top destination for Philippine products.

The events in Rizal Park on Monday were certainly a human tragedy and senseless loss of life. But they revealed something of the rottenness of capitalism, of the governments that protect the interests of their national bourgeoisie and of the "bodies of armed men" which do their bidding.



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