Twenty thousand displaced as Philippine government bombs Mindanao

Joseph Santolan
29 October 2011

Nineteen members of the Philippine armed forces and five Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters were killed during an eight-hour long battle on the island of Basilan on October 18. Basilan is the northernmost island in the Sulu archipelago in the southern Philippines.

The story that emerges from various news reports, and particularly from the articles on the generally reliable investigative Philippine news site, *newsbreak.com.ph*, indicates that a group of high-level Special Forces trainees conducting scuba diving exercises on Basilan were given orders to "locate/arrest/neutralize" MILF leader Dan Asnawi. Initial statements from the military indicate that this was conceived of as an advanced training exercise.

A warrant was made out for the arrest of Asnawi, but those conducting the operation did not bring the document with them. The 'neutralize' order was being carried out. This was a mission of targeted assassination.

Both the Philippine government and the MILF accused each other of violating an ongoing ceasefire. The MILF claimed that the encounter occurred within an "Area of Temporary Stay" (ATS), a ceasefire zone in which incursions by the Philippine military are prohibited. The military countered that the clash was four kilometers outside the ATS, and was thus an ambush carried out by MILF troops against a training exercise.

Disputes over the ATS are impossible to resolve. The geographic boundaries of an ATS are never clearly established, so statements about soldiers being within them or four kilometers outside are largely meaningless. The duration of an 'area of *temporary* stay' is also not specified. The Al-Barka ATS was established in 2008 so that the Philippine military could pursue members of the terrorist group, Abu Sayyaf, in MILF territory. The Philippine military now claims that the Al-Barka ATS no longer exists.

President Benigno Aquino quickly attempted to distance himself from the event. He publicly blamed leaders within the military for conducting an operation without his approval and sacked four army officers, including the head of Special Operations on Basilan.

Rival politicians, most prominently former President Joseph Estrada, sections of the military and editorials in the Philippine press called for the end to the ceasefire with the MILF, and a policy of 'all-out war.' Aquino responded by demanding the resignation of the Army spokesperson who had called for the ending of the ceasefire. Aquino stated that his administration's policy was the pursuit of 'all-out justice' against 'lawless elements,' and not 'all-out war.'

What lurked behind these threadbare euphemisms was soon made clear. On October 24, Aquino ordered the aerial bombardment and military assault of the town of Payao in Zamboanga Sibugay. At least 27 people were killed and about 20,000 became refugees as they fled the area of assault.

Zamboanga Sibugay is on the southwest coast of the main island of Mindanao, not on Basilan. The target of the assault was not the MILF group involved in the encounter of October 18; rather it was a rogue faction within the MILF under the leadership of Waning Abdulsalam.

Disputes over the use of funds gained through illegal logging activities within MILF territories have led to the creation of several splinter groups whose activities have hampered the peace negotiations between the Aquino administration and the established leadership of the MILF. These are the 'lawless elements' that the Aquino administration is targeting.

© World Socialist Web Site

In the aftermath of secret peace talks conducted in Japan between Philippine government representatives and the leaders of the MILF, Aquino demanded that the MILF pursue and 'deal with' its rogue elements. Nothing has come from this demand. The Aquino administration is using the events in Basilan as a pretext for the pursuit and elimination of these groups, which have formed a serious hurdle to establishing control over the Mindanao countryside.

Headlines in the Philippine press on October 29 indicate that the Philippine military is now poised to assault Al-Barka on Basilan as a continuation of its operations in Zamboanga.

The history of conflict on Basilan is a long and sordid tale of government machinations and assaults, and terrorist kidnappings and bombings. In 1991, under President Corazon Aquino, the Philippine government, with the guidance and funding of US intelligence agencies, encouraged the formation of the Abu Sayyaf group as a wedge within Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and MILF territory on Basilan. One of the founding members of Abu Sayyaf was an anti-communist agent of the military, Edwin Angeles, whom the military provided with both funds and weapons.

Abu Sayyaf proved to be a Frankenstein monster. It embarked on a wave of indiscriminate bombings and kidnappings throughout the southern Philippines. Abu Sayyaf was then used a justification for repeated US military incursions in the Philippines. In 2002, the Philippine military engaged in the targeted assassination of a head of Abu Sayyaf, with the support of US Navy Seals and guidance provided by a CIA reconnaissance plane.

The terrorist actions of the small Abu Sayyaf group have been frequently used by the Philippine government to justify military action in southwestern Mindanao in the lands claimed by the MILF.

In 2007, Abu Sayyaf captured and beheaded 14 Philippine Marines on Basilan. President Gloria Arroyo established an Independent Joint Fact Finding Committee to investigate the event. The committee named the leaders within Abu Sayyaf who were responsible for the event. No mention was made in the report of MILF leader Asnawi.

The justification provided by the military for the incursion near Al-Barka on Basilan that led to the battle of October 18 was the arrest of Asnawi. Western Mindanao Command spokesperson Lt. Col. Randolph Cabangbang stated that the special forces were deployed "on a mission to look for Asnawi, who has a pending warrant of arrest. Asnawi was one of those responsible for the 2007 beheading of 14 marines at Al-Barka town."

Within 24 hours of the armed conflict at Al-Barka, a 20 minute video was released on YouTube purporting to be recent footage of the MILF murdering unarmed civilians in Lanao, an MILF territory on the main island of Mindanao. A journalist revealed the footage to be a ten-year-old video clip of Abu Sayyaf murdering members of a paramilitary group on Basilan. Someone with access to this footage, almost certainly in the Philippine military, released it as a deliberate provocation in the call for all-out war against the MILF.

The Philippine government has been engaged in peace talks with MILF since 1998, when the MILF dropped its demand for secession and instead insisted on being given autonomy within the Philippines. Under the presidency of Joseph Estrada the peace talks broke down as he declared a policy of 'all-out war,' which resulted in the death of thousands and in 600,000 displaced refugees.

When Estrada was kicked out of office, President Arroyo resumed peace talks with the MILF. Under her presidency, the United States came to play an increasingly prominent role in the negotiations. Washington orchestrated and arranged secret talks between Aquino and the MILF last August in Japan, where a 'sub-state' solution to the problem was first presented. The 'lawless elements' whom Aquino has ordered bombed and attacked, are the primary hurdle to the US-backed process moving forward.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site