

Malaysian military bombs forces of Philippine sultan

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On March 5, Malaysian F/A 18 and Hawk fighter jets bombed the followers of the Philippine Sultan of Sulu occupying Lahad Datu, in Sabah, North Borneo. The bombing lasted for 30 minutes. In its aftermath, hundreds of heavily armed police and military forces moved into the area, conducting what was termed a “mopping up” operation, under the official name Ops Daulat.

The followers of the Sulu Sultan are now officially numbered at 235, among them at least some women. The official government and media reports following the bombing campaign were confused and contradictory.

Malaysian papers first reported total victory, although what exactly that meant was not clear. Several sites reported that ongoing operations were clearing dead bodies out of a local river. This was followed by a denial issued by the Sultan’s spokesperson. He stated that the Sultan’s followers had vacated the town in Lahad Datu prior to the bombing run and were all alive, although still surrounded by Malaysian security forces. The most recent reports state that no one died during the bombardment.

The tense stand-off is the result of the Sultan of Sulu, the head of a political dynasty in the southern Philippines, asserting a long-standing territorial claim to the Malaysian state of Sabah. In early February, he deployed his armed followers to the region. The move was calculated to undermine the recent peace deal brokered by Kuala Lumpur between the government of the Philippines and the armed insurgency of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The peace deal, if successfully concluded, would remove the political power of the Sultan and his ally the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). [See “Fourteen killed in stand-off between Philippine sultan and Malaysia”].

Shooting first broke out on March 1 with 14 killed. Over the weekend, Malaysian police reported that there were bands of armed Filipino supporters of the Sultan roving throughout Sabah. The state of Sabah is home to

hundreds of thousands of Filipino workers, the majority undocumented immigrants, who work in the palm oil plantations. The police claimed that these “bands” were part of an uprising of the Filipino residents. Claiming that they were going to inspect a suspected cache of arms, the police entered the village of Kampung Sri Jaya Siminul. They were reportedly surrounded and fired upon, with six police and six Filipinos dying in the firefight.

Further exacerbating the tense situation were the press releases made by Nur Misuari and other leaders of the MNLF. The MNLF leadership issued statements that tens of thousands of their supporters in Mindanao were now sailing to Sabah, fully armed. There have been no news reports of such forces having sailed in the past 24 hours. The Philippine government reported having intercepted 70 additional fighters en route to Sabah.

On March 4, on the eve of the bombing campaign, Philippine foreign minister Albert del Rosario flew to Kuala Lumpur to meet with his counterpart, Sri’ Anifah Aman. The meeting was conducted behind closed doors, but in its aftermath the foreign ministers issued a joint statement denouncing the Sultan’s forces as “terrorists.” Del Rosario flew back to Manila and at 7 am the next morning the Malaysian military commenced their bombing campaign.

The stand-off continues to be complicated by election campaigns in both Malaysia and the Philippines.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, at the head of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, had been responding to the crisis with some hesitancy in an attempt to preserve his political constituency among the ethnic Malay population in Sabah, particularly among recently naturalized Filipino immigrants. Najib was coming under sharp criticism from the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (People’s Alliance, PR), which mounted a fiercely nationalist denunciation of the “foreign threat” to all those “born in Malaysia.”

With the shootings over the weekend, it became clear that the BN was losing a great deal of political ground to the opposition. Najib responded by issuing a statement, “For our sovereignty and stability, we will not allow even an inch of Malaysian territory to be threatened or taken by anyone.” At Najib’s instructions, Filipino palm oil plantation workers are being rounded up and prepared for possible deportation. No numbers are yet available, but several Filipinos interviewed in the detention camps have reported that the Malaysian police are segregating them along tribal and linguistic lines, dividing them into Tausug, Sulu and other groups.

Sabah is one of the federated states of Malaysia where support for the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition and its leading party, United Malays National Organization (UMNO), is most vulnerable. The election is yet to be formally announced, but several analysts have indicated that it could be won or lost in the states of Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo.

In the Philippines, President Aquino has been under intense pressure to preserve the peace deal with the MILF and has been treading very softly in the confrontation with Malaysia. The rival political coalition, United Nationalist Alliance (UNA), has seized the opportunity to denounce Aquino for failing to uphold ‘national sovereignty’ in Borneo.

The Makabayan coalition, the political front organization of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), has been particularly flagrant in this matter. They have openly declared their support for their Sultan of Sulu. Satur Ocampo, one of Makabayan’s leading spokesmen, appeared at the Sultan’s press conference seated directly to the right of the Sultan’s own spokesperson. Teddy Casino, senatorial candidate of Makabayan, declared his support for the Sultan’s territorial claim and his forces in Malaysia. Makabayan staged a rally outside the Malaysian embassy in Manila denouncing Aquino as “a traitor to the nation.”

Aquino has responded by denouncing the Sultan’s invasion of Malaysia as the product of a “conspiracy” of forces around former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. The Sultan of Sulu was a senatorial candidate on Arroyo’s party’s ticket in a previous election.

Arroyo has now been charged by the Aquino administration with several counts of economic plunder and election fraud. The moves against Arroyo, while ostensibly about the conduct of an anti-corruption campaign, are in fact part of a consolidation of power from sections of the Philippine elite who had over the past

decade begun to orient the politics and economy of the Philippines away from the United States and toward China.

The same day that Aquino denounced Arroyo’s political allies as being the masterminds of the Sabah invasion, fresh charges of economic plunder were brought against Arroyo, again for a business deal concluded with ties to Chinese capital. The charges were filed by the Maoist break-away organization, Sanlakas.

Underlying the conflict in Sabah is the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia with its provocative military and political machinations against China throughout the region. The Bangsamoro peace accord in Mindanao between the MILF and the Philippine government was initiated and driven forward by Washington in its quest for a military base in the region.

The borders of post-colonial nation states are never cut clean. They are drawn on the map under the pressures of political consolidation, economic contentions, and the rivalries of the imperialist powers. These arbitrary boundaries are particularly messy in the archipelagic polities of Southeast Asia, where thousands of islands have long been engaged in maritime trade conducted among hundreds of ethnic groups.

The US China rivalry cuts through the heart of Philippine and Malaysian politics. The local elite have been engaged in an impossible balancing act between economic ties to China and the threats and inducements of Washington. This jostling between powers upset many traditional alliances and displaced longstanding loyalties. It has brought mounting friction to the fractious and porous borders of the island Southeast Asia. It is this that has led to the stand-off in Sabah.

The Sultan’s forces are apparently still on the ground in Sabah and surrounded by the Malaysian armed forces, who have demonstrated that they intend to drown the intruders in blood. The Philippine and Malaysian press is characterized by tones of increasingly strident nationalism. The dangers of a larger conflict emerging out of this bizarre stand-off are very real.



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