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## **Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation**

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# Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation

## Summary

From January 2002 until July 31, 2002, the United States committed nearly 1,300 troops to the Philippines and \$93 million in military aid to assist Philippine armed forces (AFP) in operations against the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group in the southern Philippines. The U.S. action, dubbed Operation Balikatan, partly was in response to Philippine President Arroyo's strong support of the United States following the September 11 al Qaeda attack on the United States. A historic Muslim resistance to non-Muslim rulers broke out into massive rebellion in the 1970s. Two large resistance groups, a Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and a Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fought the Philippine government into the 1990s and entered into tenuous truces in 1996 and 2001 respectively. Abu Sayyaf emerged in 1990 as a splinter group composed of former MNLF fighters and Filipinos who had fought in Afghanistan. Abu Sayyaf resorted to terrorist tactics, including kidnappings, executions of civilians, and bombings. As Operation Balikatan began, Abu Sayyaf continued to hold two Americans, a missionary couple, the Burnhams. Abu Sayyaf had links with Osamu bin Laden's al Qaeda organization in the early 1990s, but Philippine officials have given conflicting assessments of current links. U.S. officials asserted that there is evidence of links between Abu Sayyaf and terrorist groups.

Philippine government policy has been to apply military pressure on Abu Sayyaf. Operations were constrained by several factors including difficult terrain, inadequate Philippine military equipment, avoiding clashing with the MILF and MNLF, and consideration of the safety of the hostages. These factors complicated the U.S. military role and created doubts among U.S. officials and apparent confusion in U.S. policy. The Bush Administration facilitated a \$300,000 ransom payment to Abu Sayyaf for the American hostages, but it failed to secure their release. An AFP rescue attempt on June 7, 2002, resulted in the killing of Martin Burnham but the rescue of the wife, Gracia. U.S. military support, however, did achieve successes. AFP operations against Abu Sayyaf became more aggressive and effective; Abu Sayyaf strength was seriously eroded. AFP commanders praised U.S. equipment, U.S. intelligence gathering, and U.S. assistance in planning AFP operations. The U.S. military's civic action project on Basilan appeared to weaken support for Abu Sayyaf on the island and received general praise in the Philippines.

The Philippines and the United States decided against extending the U.S. military role against Abu Sayyaf after the July 31 deadline for Operation Balikatan. This decision was reconsidered, and the Pentagon disclosed a plan in February 2003 that would involve a potential U.S. combat role against Abu Sayyaf on the island of Jolo. Controversy in the Philippines over such a combat role caused the U.S. and Philippine governments to begin a re-negotiation of the plan. The Bush Administration also considered placing the MILF on the official U.S. list of terrorist countries amidst the breakdown of the Philippine truce with the MILF and growing evidence of links between the MILF and Jeemah Islamiah, the al Qaeda-linked group operating in Southeast Asia.

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# Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation

## The Philippine Response to September 11

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo voiced strong support for the United States in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack. The Philippines, she said, is prepared to “go every step of the way” with the United States. President Arroyo allowed U.S. military forces to use Filipino ports and airfields to support military operations in Afghanistan. She cited morality and Philippine national interests as reasons for her pro-U.S. stand. She defined the national interest as linking a struggle against international terrorism with the struggle against terrorism within the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> She supported the U.S. war against Iraq in March 2003, offering the U.S. military air space and refueling facilities and preparing to send about 700 Filipino military personnel to Iraq for postwar assistance.<sup>2</sup>

Philippine terrorism has been multifaceted for at least three decades and has been carried out by different groups with different agendas. A significant communist insurgency, the New Peoples Army (NPA) in the 1970s and 1980s engaged in bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings. The communists today still have an estimated armed strength of over 10,000; and the Bush Administration designated the NPA as a terrorist group in August 2002. Criminal syndicates have practiced widespread kidnappings for ransom. The target of President Arroyo’s policy, however, is Muslim insurgency and terrorism.

This report provides an overview and policy analysis of the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group in the Philippines and the Philippine-U.S. program of military cooperation against it. It examines the origins and operations of Abu Sayyaf, the efforts of the Philippine government and military to eliminate it, and the implications of a greater U.S. military role in attempts to suppress it. The report will be updated periodically.

## Historic Muslim Insurgency

Located on the big southern island of Mindanao and the Sulu island chain southwest of Mindanao, Filipino Muslims, called Moros, since the time of Spanish

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<sup>1</sup> Landler, Mark. Philippines Offers U.S. Its Troops and Bases. *New York Times*, October 2, 2001. P. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Pazzibugan, Dona Z. RP to Open Air Space, Refueling Facilities to US. *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (Internet version), March 22, 2003. Garcia, Danilo. 700 Soldiers to be Sent to Iraq. *Pilipino Star Ngayon* (Internet version), March 29, 2003.

rule, revolted against Spanish colonizers of the Philippines from the 17th century on, the American rulers of the early 20th century, and Philippine governments since independence in 1946. From 1899 to 1914, the U.S. military conducted a number of campaigns to suppress Muslim insurgents in the southern Philippines—campaigns which were controversial because of heavy civilian casualties. Muslim grievances after 1946 focused on the growing settlement of Catholic Filipinos on Mindanao, which reduced the geographical area of a Muslim majority (there are about 7 million Filipino Muslims). Muslims revolted in the 1970s under a Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which demanded an independent Muslim state. An estimated 120,000 people were killed in the 1970s in heavy fighting between the MNLF and the Philippine armed forces (AFP).<sup>3</sup>

Since the late 1970s, there have been two trends in the Muslim problem. The first has been negotiations between the Philippine government and the MNLF. As a result, the MNLF abandoned its goal of an independent Muslim state. An agreement was reached in 1996 that created an autonomous Muslim region. This apparent positive trend was countered by the fragmentation of the Muslim movement. A segment of the MNLF broke away in 1978 and formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MILF demanded independence for Muslim populated regions and proclaimed that a Muslim state would be based on “Koranic principles.” The MILF gained strength into the 1990s. By 1995-96, U.S. estimates placed armed MILF strength at 35,000-45,000 in seven provinces on Mindanao. The MILF had large base camps and functional governmental operations. Its operations included attacks on the AFP and planting bombs in Mindanao cities. A Bangsamoro Peoples Consultative Assembly of approximately 200,000 people was held in 1996 in MILF-held territory and called for an independent Muslim state.<sup>4</sup>

Stepped-up MILF military operations in 1998-99 prompted Philippine President Joseph Estrada to order an all-out military offensive against MILF base camps. The AFP captured the MILF’s main base on Mindanao and damaged the MILF militarily. In 2001, Philippine government-MILF negotiations resulted in a tentative cease-fire. This success was offset, however, by the break between the government and MNLF leader, Nur Misuari. When the Philippine government opposed his re-election as governor of the Muslim autonomous region, MNLF forces attacked the AFP and took civilian hostages on Jolo island in the Sulu chain and in the city of Zamboanga in west Mindanao. Nur Misuari fled to Malaysia where he was arrested by Malaysian authorities.

## **Abu Sayyaf: Origins, Strength, and Operations**

Abubakar Janjalani, the son of a fisherman on Basilan island, formed Abu Sayyaf in 1990. Janjalani had become connected with a Muslim fundamentalist

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<sup>3</sup> Sales, Peter M. War in Mindanao. *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, October-November 2000, p. 8, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Tiglao, Rigoberto. Hidden Strength; Crescent Moon Rising. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 23, 1995. P. 22-28. Tiglao, Rigoberto. Moro Reprise. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 26, 1996-January 2, 1997. P. 22.

movement, Al Islamic Tabligh, in the 1980s. That organization received financial support from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, including funds to send young Muslim men to schools in the Middle East. Janjalani studied in Saudi Arabia and Libya and became radicalized. When he returned to Basilan, he recruited two groups into Abu Sayyaf (meaning “sword bearer” in Arabic): dissidents from the MNLF and Filipinos who had fought with the Afghan mujaheddin rebels against the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup>

Over the next five years, Abu Sayyaf staged ambushes, bombings, kidnappings, and executions, mainly against Filipino Christians on Basilan and the west coast of Mindanao. Its strength grew only slowly to an estimated 600 by 1995.<sup>6</sup> Abu Sayyaf operations declined for four years after 1995, partly as a result of the 1996 settlement between the Philippine government and the MNLF. In 1998, AFP troops killed Abubakar Janjalani. His brother, Khadaffy, and Ghalib Andang took command. Then in April 2000, Abu Sayyaf began kidnaping operations further afield geographically and aimed at foreigners, with a principle aim of extracting ransom payments. Abu Sayyaf forces commanded by Andang, aboard fast speed boats, attacked a tourist resort in the Malaysian state of Sabah and kidnaped 21 foreigners, including Malaysians, Frenchmen, Germans, Finns, and South Africans. In July 2000, Abu Sayyaf seized three French journalists. It released the hostages later in the year after it received ransom payments, including money reportedly from European governments funneled through the Libyan government. Estimates of the amount of this ransom range from \$10 to \$25 million.<sup>7</sup>

According to Philippine government officials, Abu Sayyaf used the 2000 ransom to recruit new members, raising its strength to an estimated 1,000 or more, and acquire new equipment, including communications equipment and more fast speedboats. Abu Sayyaf used speedboats again on May 27, 2000, in venturing 300 miles across the Sulu Sea to attack a tourist resort on Palawan, the Philippines’ large, westernmost island. Khadaffy Janjalani commanded the operation. Abu Sayyaf kidnaped 20 people, including three Americans. It took them to Basilan where they were held by a faction of Abu Sayyaf headed by a volatile individual, Abu Sabaya. Abu Sayyaf announced in June 2001 that it had beheaded one of the Americans, Guillermo Sobero, of Coronado, California. It continued to hold Martin and Gracia Burnham, Christian missionaries of Wichita, Kansas, and Deborah Yap, a Filipino nurse. Most of the other abductees from Palawan were freed after more ransom was paid, reportedly as much as \$1 million per person. Throughout 2000 and 2001, Abu Sayyaf kidnaped numerous Filipinos on Basilan and Mindanao, releasing some after ransom payments and executing others. Ex-hostages claimed Abu Sayyaf was demanding \$2 million for the Burnhams.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In Mindanao, the Islamic Fundamentalist Movement Appears to be Spearheaded by the Tabligh and Abu Sayyaf. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 29, 1994. P. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Richburg, Keith. Spoilers of the Peace. *Washington Post*, May 25, 1995. P. A33.

<sup>7</sup> Fisk, Robert. The Double-Edged Sword of Gaddafi’s Links with the Philippines. *London Independent* (internet version), August 22, 2000. Tan, Abby. Kidnappings a Blow to Philippine Image. *Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2001. P. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Romero, Paolo. Abus Attempting a Robin Hood. *Philippine Star* (internet version), July (continued...)

## Connections to Al Qaeda and Other Foreign Links

The Wall Street Journal of December 3, 2001, quoted Admiral Denis Blair, Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, that “we’re seeing increasing evidence that there are potential current links” between Abu Sayyaf and Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda terrorist organization. U.S. officials made similar statements early in 2003. There have been varying accounts regarding Abu Sayyaf’s relationship with al Qaeda. It is accepted that Abu Sayyaf received funding and support from al Qaeda in the early 1990s. Money came from Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, a Saudi and brother-in-law of bin Laden, who operated a number of Islamic charities in the southern Philippines. Ramzi Yoesef, an al Qaeda operative, came to the Philippines in 1994. He and other al Qaeda operatives reportedly trained Abu Sayyaf fighters.<sup>9</sup> Yoesef established an al Qaeda cell in Manila. Yoesuf used the cell to plan an assassination of Pope John Paul II, the planting of bombs aboard 12 U.S. airliners flying trans-Pacific routes, and the crashing of an airplane into the Central Intelligence Agency’s headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Filipino police uncovered the cell in 1995 and provided information on the plot to the C.I.A. and F.B.I.. Yoesef later was arrested in Pakistan and extradited to the United States for trial over his complicity in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center.<sup>10</sup>

There is less information regarding Abu Sayyaf’s recent relationship with al Qaeda. Filipino officials close to President Arroyo have contended that the relationship declined after 1995 when the Ramzi Yoesuf plot was uncovered and Khalifa left the Philippines. Civilian officials assert that there is no hard evidence of current ties. They cite the decline in foreign financial support as a key reason for Abu Sayyaf’s expanded kidnappings for ransom. In contrast, Filipino military officials claim that active links exist. A secret AFP intelligence report of early 2000 reportedly asserted that Abu Sayyaf received training, arms, and other support from al Qaeda and other Middle East terrorist groups.<sup>11</sup> AFP officers subsequently reported that “foreign Muslims” were training Abu Sayyaf on Mindanao to conduct urban terrorism and that Osamu bin Laden had ordered stepped-up aid to Abu Sayyaf, including possibly \$3 million in 2000.<sup>12</sup> In July 2001, Philippine Senator Rudolfo Biazon, chairman of the Senate committee on national security and defense and a

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<sup>8</sup> (...continued)

27, 2001. What Ransom? *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (internet version), June 18, 2001. Quezon City GMA 7 television broadcast, December 7, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Police Hunt for Sudanese Terrorist in Mindanao. *Manila Chronicle*, December 15, 1995. P. 3. Pomonti, Jean-Claude. Al Qaeda’s Invisible Presence in Southeast Asia. *Le Monde*, November 4-5, 2001, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of the Ramzi Yousef bomb plot, see: Brzezinski, Matthew. Bust and Boom. *Washington Post Magazine*, December 31, 2001. P. 15-17, 27-28.

<sup>11</sup> Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. Terrorism War’s New Front. *Washington Post*, December 22, 2001. P. A1. Kurlantzick, Joshua. Muslim Separatists in Global Network of Terrorist Groups. *Washington Times*, May 2, 2000. P. A13.

<sup>12</sup> Arquiza, Ray. Interpol Alerts RP on Bin Laden’s Men. *Philippine Star* (internet version), July 10, 2001. Gomez, Jim. Philippine Rebels, bin Laden Linked. Agence France Presse report, June 20, 2000.

former highly decorated Marine General, cited reports from United Nations sources that at least 50 Abu Sayyaf members were being trained in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

Abu Sayyaf's other foreign links are with individuals and possibly groups in Malaysia and with Libya. A prominent Malaysian, Sairan Karno, helped to negotiate the release of the hostages in 2000. Libya's leader, Moammar Gadafi, was the key intermediary in hostage negotiations in 2000 and 2001 involving Abu Sayyaf and other Filipino Muslim groups. Libya was a conduit for ransoms paid to Abu Sayyaf by European governments and other parties. Libya has been accused of aiding the MILF, and it was involved in Philippine-MILF negotiations in 2001 for a truce. Libya also funds Muslim schools, mosques, and other facilities in the southern Philippines. It offered money for "livelihood projects" in its role in the 2000 hostage negotiations. Like the prior charities of Mohammed Khalifa, this raises the possibility that Libyan money gets channeled to Abu Sayyaf. Libya officially has condemned Abu Sayyaf kidnappings.<sup>14</sup>

In February 2003, the Philippine government expelled an Iraqi diplomat after Philippine intelligence organs traced telephone calls from Abu Sayyaf to the diplomat shortly before a bombing in Zamboanga, Mindanao, in October 2002, which killed a U.S. soldier and three Filipinos. Subsequently, Filipino officials announced the discovery of Iraqi "sleeper cells" and the arrest of alleged members of the cells.

## Links to the MILF and MNLF

Leaders of the MILF and MNLF have denied any supportive links with Abu Sayyaf. They have criticized Abu Sayyaf's terrorist attacks against civilians. The MILF rejected the Afghan Taliban's call for a jihad against the United States and condemned the September 11 attack.<sup>15</sup> There have been reports of links between the MILF and al Qaeda. Singapore officials reported in January 2002 that an MILF trainer and bomb specialist assisted the group of 13 members of Jeemah Islamiah arrested in Singapore in December 2001 for plotting to bomb U.S. and other foreign targets in Singapore.<sup>16</sup> Subsequent reports in 2002, particularly of Singapore's investigation of Jeemah Islamiah, substantiated that the MILF provided key training

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<sup>13</sup> Nocum, Armand N. Talibans Training 50 Abu Members, says Biazon. *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (internet version), July 6, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Mydans, Seth. Libyan Aid Helps to Free Hostage Held in Philippines. *New York Times*, October 21, 2001. P. A9. Sheehan, Deidre. Buying Trouble. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 7, 2000. P. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Mendez, Christina. MILF Rejects 'Holy War' vs US. *Philippine Star* (internet version), September 17, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Mydans, Seth. Suspects in Singapore Are Linked to Al Qaeda and Plans for Anti-U.S. Attacks. *New York Times*, January 12, 2002. P. A8. Marinay, Manny B. Philippine Military Bares MILF's Foreign Sources of Funds. *Manila Times* (internet version), March 27, 2002.

and other assistance in recent years to members of Jeemah Islamiah.<sup>17</sup> Jeemah Islamiah also was believed responsible for the bombing in Bali, Indonesia, in October 2002. Evidence showed that Jeemah Islamiah was linked with al Qaeda; its proclaimed goal is to create a Southeast Asian Muslim state from Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines.

The AFP claims that links exist and that elements of the MILF and MNLF give active aid to Abu Sayyaf.<sup>18</sup> There clearly is contact between Abu Sayyaf and units of the two larger organizations in the Sulu islands, Basilan, and western Mindanao, where all three groups operate. The MNLF's attack on AFP units on Jolo island in November 2001 demonstrated the proximity of MNLF and Abu Sayyaf units. A number of MILF units operate on Basilan. Some Abu Sayyaf members were formerly with the MNLF. Several thousand MNLF members kept their weapons despite the 1996 agreement and operate as independent commands. Factions with the MILF and MNLF are hard-line advocates of Muslim independence and reject autonomy proposals; they undoubtedly would be inclined to cooperate with Abu Sayyaf under certain circumstances.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the tenuous relations between the Philippine government and the MILF and MNLF raise the strong possibility of shifting linkages among the three Muslim groups.

## **Philippine Government and AFP Policies and Operations**

The basic Philippine government policy since August 2000 has been constant military pressure on Abu Sayyaf. In September 2000, President Estrada ordered the AFP to commit over 1,500 troops into Jolo to conduct operations against Abu Sayyaf units that had taken the foreign hostages in Malaysia. In mid-2002, after the completion of the U.S.-supported AFP operation on Basilan, President Arroyo ordered more troops to Jolo with the aim of wiping out Abu Sayyaf in its stronghold. President Arroyo had ordered the AFP into Basilan after the hostage-taking on Palawan. As many as 4,500 troops were deployed to Basilan in 2001.

AFP operations were limited by several factors. One is the mountainous, jungle terrain of the two islands pockmarked by underground caves. A second is the support civilians on Jolo and Basilan reportedly give Abu Sayyaf, although recent surveys of Muslims on Basilan suggested that many are disillusioned by Abu Sayyaf's violence. A third was the limited military equipment of the AFP, including an absence of night vision and other surveillance equipment and shortages of helicopters, mortars, naval patrol craft, surveillance aircraft, and even basic necessities like military boots. A

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<sup>17</sup> Wain, Barry and McBeth, John . A Perilous Choice for the Presidents. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 3, 2002. p. 17-20.

<sup>18</sup> Alipala, Inot. MILF, MNLF Aiding Abu, Military Charges. *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (internet version), July 5, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Sheehan, Deidre. Swords into Ploughshares. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 20, 2001. P. 30-32. Lerner, Marc. Philippines Guerrilla Group has bin Laden Links. *Washington Times*, September 24, 2001. P. A13.

fourth limitation appears to have been the unevenness in the quality of the AFP. The apparent attrition of Abu Sayyaf strength in 2001 reflected AFP successes, but there also were failed operations. The most controversial was the failed encirclement of the Abu Sayyaf unit holding the Burnhams and Filipino hostages in a church in the town of Lamitan in June 2001. Several AFP units pulled out of their positions without explanation, allowing the Abu Sayyaf unit to break out of the encirclement. A Catholic priest and other witnesses charged that Abu Sayyaf had bribed AFP commanders to pull units from their positions, and Filipino Catholic bishops called for an inquiry.<sup>20</sup> A Philippine Senate Committee prepared a report in August 2002 citing “strong circumstantial evidence” that AFP commanders at Lamitan had colluded with Abu Sayyaf.

A fifth limitation was the hostage situation itself. In 2000, European governments reportedly pressured the Philippine government to refrain from “excessive” military operations while Abu Sayyaf held the European hostages. In 2002, there reportedly was similar U.S. pressure regarding the Burnhams. Arroyo Administration officials and AFP commanders said they were restrained from air bombing and using artillery and mortars out of concern for the safety of the hostages. A sixth limitation was the AFP deployment of most of its forces in the southern Philippines in the broader areas of Mindanao dominated by the MILF and MNLF. Only a small percentage of Filipino troops was committed against Abu Sayyaf. A final constraint was the danger of AFP operations producing a large numbers of civilian casualties or displaced civilians. The Estrada Administration came under criticism in 2000 over reports that the AFP offensive on Jolo caused civilian casualties and displacement among the island’s 600,000 residents.

The Philippine government has opposed payment of ransom for hostages.<sup>21</sup> The reality is that the government has allowed the payment of ransom from members of hostages’ families and from European governments through Libya in 2000.

The Arroyo Administration negotiated a mechanism for trilateral cooperation against terrorist groups with Indonesia and Malaysia. It appears to have had some success in securing Malaysia’s cooperation. Malaysia increased its naval patrols in the Sulu Sea, and it arrested Nur Misuari after he fled to Malaysia in November 2001.

## **The Implications of U.S. Involvement**

Beginning in October 2001, the United States sent groups of military observers to Mindanao to assess AFP operations against Abu Sayyaf, render advice, and examine AFP equipment needs. President Bush extended \$93 million in military aid to the Philippines when President Arroyo visited Washington in November 2001, and he offered a direct U.S. military role in combating Abu Sayyaf. President Arroyo

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<sup>20</sup> Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. Rebels’ Escape Draws Scrutiny. *Washington Post*, September 1, 2001, p. A 18.

<sup>21</sup> Sheehan, *Buying Trouble*, p. 529. See also Kyodo News Service (Tokyo) report, July 13, 2000; and the Agence France Presse report, July 12, 2000.

insisted that the U.S. military role should be advisory and that the AFP would retain full operational responsibility. By late December 2001, the AFP on Mindanao began to receive quantities of U.S. military equipment. Moreover, AFP commanders expressed frustration over the failure to rescue the hostages and suggested that they would support President Arroyo if she sought a more direct U.S. military role.<sup>22</sup> It was announced in January 2002 that the United States would deploy 650 troops to Mindanao and Basilan within a month. Support/maintenance personnel would number 500. Special Forces numbering 150 would perform training and advisory functions; and some of these would accompany AFP units on Basilan. U.S. military personnel would not conduct independent operations, but they would be armed and authorized to defend themselves.

This enlarged U.S. military role had several implications. Successful military operations against Abu Sayyaf would extend U.S. successes against terrorism beyond Afghanistan and reinforce the Bush Administration's message to governments everywhere that the United States is determined to fight terrorism on many fronts. The Philippine government's example could influence other governments to cooperate with the United States. Success against Abu Sayyaf would further revive the Philippine-U.S. security alliance, a goal of U.S. policy since the signing in 1998 of a Philippine-U.S. Visiting Forces Agreement. It undoubtedly would produce greater Philippine-U.S. cooperation against any future attempts by al Qaeda or Jeemah Islamiah to plant cells in Manila or elsewhere in the Philippines.

Other implications, however, were complex and contained uncertain outcomes. One was the likely heightened danger to American citizens and businesses in the Philippines, who could be targeted by Abu Sayyaf or al Qaeda, or even by the communist NPA. This was highlighted by the killing of an American missionary in a terrorist bombing in Davao in southeast Mindanao on March 4, 2003.

Another implication relates to confining the mission to Abu Sayyaf. In committing U.S. troops in January-February 2002, the Bush Administration reportedly wanted to avoid military involvement with the MILF.<sup>23</sup> The Arroyo administration supported this position because it paralleled the Philippine government's policy of maintaining a cease-fire with the MILF negotiated in 2001. However, the cease-fire became shaky in February and March 2003 when fighting broke out at an MILF stronghold on Mindanao and the MILF blew up several electric power grids on the island. The AFP accused the MILF of responsibility for a bombings in the city of Davao in March and April 2003, although reports mentioned other groups as possibly behind the bombings. If the tenuous Philippine government truce with the MILF should collapse, the AFP undoubtedly would use recently supplied U.S. military equipment against these groups and would favor a direct U.S. support role against the MILF. The Philippine government might want U.S. training and advice for AFP units committed against the MILF. U.S. military personnel with

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<sup>22</sup> More US 'Advisors' to Help Fight Sayyaf. *Manila Times*, January 4, 2002. P. 1. Ng-Gadil, Mirasol. AFP Admitted that Operation Against Abu Sayyuf Bandits is Difficult. *Manila Kabayan* (internet version), December 30, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Landler, Mark. The Temperature's a Lot Warmer but the Mission's the Same: Hunting Down Terrorists. *New York Times*, November 4, 2001. P. B4.

the AFP could become involved in clashes with MILF or MNLF units in areas where these groups were in proximity with Abu Sayyaf. Mounting evidence appeared in 2002 of MILF support for Jemaah Islamiah. As a result, the Bush Administration in late 2002 considered placing the MILF on the U.S. official list of foreign terrorist organizations. President Arroyo reportedly convinced U.S. officials not to take that action in the interest of preserving the Philippine government's cease-fire with the MILF.<sup>24</sup>

The enlarged U.S. military role also carried the risk of political backlashes. Muslims in neighboring Indonesia and Malaysia might react against the United States, especially if the U.S. military role expanded beyond missions against Abu Sayyaf and if it became prolonged. Influential Filipino "nationalist" and leftist groups criticized the U.S. military role on Basilan, even though polls indicated overwhelming Filipino public support for it and the influential Catholic Bishops Conference endorsed it. Critics charged that the United States was plotting to restore a permanent U.S. military presence in the Philippines. They were influential in the Philippine government's decision in 1991 to order the United States to withdraw from the large U.S. military bases in the Philippines. The critics also revived accounts of the controversial American military campaigns of 1899-1914.

The U.S. military role also has implications for a U.S. political role on Mindanao. The Bush Administration will face sentiment and pressure to influence the political, social, and economic issues underlying Filipino Muslim discontent: the scope and extent of autonomy of the Muslim populated region; the role of Islam in education; and economic development issues. As evidence, President Arroyo offered the MILF part of a U.S. \$115 million aid package in March 2003 for development projects in MILF-controlled areas if the MILF agreed to restore the cease-fire and sign a full peace agreement.<sup>25</sup>

## **Results of the U.S. Military Role on Basilan**

The early proposals of the Bush Administration envisaged a large, direct, and assertive role for U.S. forces: a direct combat role for U.S. military personnel, the commitment of the elite Delta Force to lead operations to rescue the Burnhams,<sup>26</sup> and assistance to the AFP against Abu Sayyaf.<sup>27</sup> However, negotiations with the Philippines over the rules of engagement for the Balikatan exercise resulted in a more limited U.S. role, as Filipino officials insisted on a non-combat role for the Americans, operations against only Abu Sayyaf, and a geographical limitation of U.S.

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<sup>24</sup> Manila, MILF Plan to Resume Peace Talks in December. Reuters News Agency, November 6, 2002. Gloria's Powers of Persuasion. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 12, 2002. p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Villanova, Maruichi. US has \$115-M Aid Plan for MILF Areas. *Philippine Star* (Internet Version), March 30, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Bonner, Raymond. Philippines Terror Group Seeks Money for Couple. *New York Times*, March 9, 2002. p. A10.

<sup>27</sup> Struck, Doug. Some Filipinos Cite Threats Beyond Abu Sayyaf. *Washington Post*, March 4, 2002. p. A13.

operations to only Basilan island and the Zamboanga peninsula. The U.S. force rose to nearly 1,300 at the height of the operation. Moreover, as the Balikatan exercise unfolded, Bush Administration and U.S. military officials appeared to reassess their views of the U.S. role. This resulted in a U.S. view to limit the American role even further than envisaged in the rules of engagement negotiated with the Philippines. It also resulted in apparent confusion and contradictions in U.S. policy.

Despite mounting evidence over MILF links with Jeemah Islamiah, the prevailing U.S. view in early 2002 emphasized that the MILF was not in league with Abu Sayyaf and was not anti-U.S. (MILF conciliatory statements about the United States may have influenced the emergence of this view.) The Bush Administration came out in support of the truce between the MILF and the Philippine government.<sup>28</sup>

Philippine-U.S. rules of engagement provided that two-man U.S. Special Forces teams could accompany AFP companies in the field on Basilan island. U.S. military officials in the Philippines reportedly favored an early implementation of this plan; but some Bush Administration officials in Washington, including Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, developed second thoughts about this U.S. role.<sup>29</sup> Rumsfeld did not detail these misgivings, but several have been reported and/or seem apparent. Command arrangements were a difficult issue in Philippine-U.S. negotiations over rules of engagement. The Americans refused to place U.S. personnel under Filipino command but agreed that U.S. personnel would take “operational instructions from Filipino commanders” in the field. Rumsfeld and other officials, however, may have had continued doubts about this kind of arrangement. Relatedly, the uneven and sometimes poor quality of AFP units may have added to these doubts.

In mid-June 2002, the Filipinos and Americans finalized arrangements for U.S. Special Forces in the field. U.S. Special Forces personnel would accompany only selected AFP companies that had reached certain specified combat skills and on only closely defined missions. Moreover, this arrangement would end on July 31, 2002, the official termination date of the Balikatan exercise. Any extension would have to be re-negotiated.<sup>30</sup> In reality, the arrangements were not implemented before the July 31 deadline.

U.S. policy toward the Burnhams contained several shifts. After the U.S. offer of the Delta Force was ruled out, American officials reportedly advised their Filipino counterparts to exercise military restraint in order to limit the danger to the Burnhams.<sup>31</sup> The Bush Administration made a decision, probably in March 2002, to support the payment of ransom to Abu Sayyaf. The payment of \$300,000 reportedly

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<sup>28</sup> Lerner, Mark. Philippines: Forces Worry Conflict Will Grow. *Washington Times*, March 2, 2002. p. A5.

<sup>29</sup> Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. U.S. Troops Have yet to Join Patrols in Philippines. *Washington Post*, May 1, 2002. p. A16.

<sup>30</sup> Schmitt, Eric. American Troops Will Begin Tighter Operations with Filipinos. *New York Times*, June 20, 2002. p. A13.

<sup>31</sup> Ricks, Thomas E. and Sipress, Alan. Spy Planes Seek out Philippine guerrillas. *Washington Post*, February 21, 2002. p. A1.

was made by private parties, probably through intermediaries that had contacts with Abu Sayyaf. U.S. FBI officials reportedly helped to deliver the money in April 2002. Abu Sayyaf did not release the Burnhams. The money reportedly did not go to the Abu Sayyaf group under Abu Sabaya which held the hostages. Instead, it went to the Jolo-based Abu Sayyaf faction under Khaddafy Janjalani, who reportedly refused to turn it over to Abu Sabaya.<sup>32</sup> The Bush Administration has not disclosed what went wrong with the ransom attempt. It has not disclosed the Administration's position toward President Arroyo's rejection of a role for Libya in negotiating a ransom payment. (Libya had negotiated the payment of ransom for nearly 30 hostages Abu Sayyaf had taken in Malaysia in 2000.)

Following the failed ransom attempt, U.S. officials reportedly shifted from their pro-restraint position and advised the AFP to adopt more aggressive tactics to rescue the Burnhams. The U.S. military provided the AFP with intelligence information that Abu Sayyaf moved the Burnhams from Basilan to the Zamboanga peninsula in April 2002 and with key intelligence in the AFP's assault on the Abu Sayyaf team holding the hostages on June 7, 2002. Martin Burnham and Filipino hostage, Deborah Yap, were killed during the fighting; Gracia Burnham was rescued.

Despite these changes in the U.S. military role and in U.S. policies and the less than successful attempt to rescue the Burnhams, the Balikatan exercise appears to have accomplished several U.S. goals. Philippine-U.S. security cooperation was advanced. AFP commanders viewed the U.S. role in Balikatan positively, and President Arroyo continued to advocate this kind of cooperation. Most reports indicate that U.S. support enhanced the capabilities of AFP units on Basilan. The period after February 2002 saw more assertive AFP patrolling on Basilan, more encounters with Abu Sayyaf, and an erosion of Abu Sayyaf strength, which apparently led to the Abu Sayyaf decision to leave Basilan with the Burnhams. In March 2003, Philippine officials estimated Abu Sayyaf strength at about 470 with about 380 on Jolo island. Filipino officials voiced praise for the modern equipment U.S. forces provided the AFP, U.S. intelligence information provided by U.S. aircraft and sophisticated communications and tracking equipment, and American assistance in planning operations.<sup>33</sup> U.S. equipment and surveillance were important in the AFP's successful operation later in June 2002 in intercepting Abu Sabaya and other Abu Sayyaf leaders at sea in which Abu Sabaya was killed.<sup>34</sup>

The Bush Administration's initiative in offering 350 U.S. personnel to conduct civic action projects on Basilan reportedly proved popular with the people on the island and probably helped to neutralize public support for Abu Sayyaf on the

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<sup>32</sup> Lerner, Mark. Hostage's Father Says Abu Sayyaf Broke Deal. *Washington Times*, April 26, 2002. p. A15. Bonner, Raymond and Schmitt, Eric. Philippine Officials Detail the Trap, Set With U.S. Help, that Snared a Rebel Leader. *New York Times*, September 22, 2002, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Gloria, Glenda M. Training Days. *Manila Newsbreak* (internet version, July 8, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> Bonner and Schmitt, Philippine Officials Detail the Trap, Set With U.S. Help, that Snared a Rebel Leader, *New York Times*, September 22, 2002, 16.

island.<sup>35</sup> The civic action projects (road building, medical care, and well-digging) may have influenced a less negative reaction of Filipino Muslims elsewhere to the U.S. military role, and the favorable Filipino media coverage appears to have helped President Arroyo contain the critics of the United States within the Manila political elite.

U.S. policy and assistance reinforced and possibly more directly influenced the Philippine government's actions against other terrorist elements in Southeast Asia. The arrests of the Indonesian Jeemah Islamiyah operatives and stepped-up cooperation with Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia since January 2002 indicate an expansion of the Philippine commitment to assist the United States against terrorist groups. In particular, the arrest and interrogation of Jeemah Islamiyah agent, Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi, provided important information on the organization and on its plot of 2001 to bomb U.S. and other foreign targets in Singapore.<sup>36</sup>

Philippine-U.S. military cooperation after the end of the Balikatan exercise on July 31, 2002, changed the U.S. support role significantly from that of Balikatan. Most U.S. troops withdrew from Mindanao and Basilan, leaving fewer than 300 to finish civic action projects and training. No U.S. Special Forces personnel were to accompany AFP units on patrol. The total number of U.S. troops in the Philippines was to be fewer than the 1,300 committed during Balikatan. The U.S. role was to emphasize the training of 16 AFP Light Reaction Companies; training of AFP personnel in helicopter night flying; and training of AFP personnel in intelligence gathering. The United States announced in August 2002 an additional \$55 million in military aid to the AFP.<sup>37</sup>

## The Jolo Decision and Resultant Controversy

A key decision for post-July 31 cooperation was whether to extend the U.S. support and assistance role southward from Basilan to Jolo and other islands in the Sulu group where Abu Sayyaf continued to operate. There was evidence of tough Philippine-U.S. negotiations on this issue and possible division within the American side. President Arroyo and Secretary of Defense Angelo Reyes voiced support for a U.S. assistance role in the Sulus. Arroyo rebuked U.S. General Donald Wurster, commander of the U.S. force in Balikatan, for his statement that a U.S. role in the Sulus was not feasible because of the presence of MILF and MNLF forces on those islands. Arroyo asserted that "the Sulu idea came from the American side" and that negotiations with U.S. officials on this were "way above his [Wurster's] head" with

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<sup>35</sup> Schmitt, Eric. By Aiding Needy Filipinos, G.I.'s Could Help Rout the Rebels. *New York Times*, July 15, 2002. p. A6.

<sup>36</sup> Indonesian Held in Manila Tells of Holy War in Asia. Reuters News Agency, September 19, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> Embassy of the Philippines. Release No. 1 Statement from Philippine Defense Secretary Angelo Reyes on his Meeting with US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on 12 August 2002. Lerner, Mark. Links With Allies Stressed in Anti-Terrorist Fight. *Washington Times*, August 4, 2002. p. A6.

the U.S. Pacific Command.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, except for reported U.S. air surveillance over Jolo, the Philippine-U.S. decision of July 2002 was not to commit the U.S. military to the Sulus. Moreover, Philippine government officials asserted that some of the units trained by the Americans would be used against the communist New Peoples Army (NPA). The NPA has existed since 1968, reached a strength of nearly 30,000 in the mid-1980s, and declined to a strength of about 5,000 in 1993-1994. However, it has revived since then and now has an estimated armed strength of 11,000. In August 2002, the Bush Administration placed the Philippine Communist Party and the NPA on the official U.S. list of terrorist organizations.

However, the continued Abu Sayyaf bombings in autumn 2002 led the U.S. Defense Department to reconsider the July decision regarding Jolo (pronounced "Holo"). U.S. officials also cited stronger evidence of connections between Abu Sayyaf and international terrorist groups. Planning and discussions with the Philippine government were underway by December 2002. In February 2003, Pentagon officials described a plan under which the United States would commit 350 Special Operations Forces (SOF) to Jolo to operate with AFP Army and Marine units down to the platoon level of 20-30 troops. Another 400 U.S. support troops would be at Zamboanga on the Mindanao mainland. Positioned offshore of Jolo would be a navy task force of 1,000 U.S. Marines and 1,300 Navy personnel equipped with Cobra attack helicopters and Harrier jets.<sup>39</sup>

According to the Pentagon description of the plan, U.S. troops would be in a combat role. This and subsequent statements indicated that the SOF on Jolo would participate in AFP offensive operations against Abu Sayyaf and that the SOF would not be limited to using their weapons for self-defense. The U.S. Marines were described as a "quick reaction" force, undoubtedly meaning that they could be sent on to Jolo to reinforce AFP units. The Cobra helicopters and Harrier jets would give AFP commanders the option of requesting U.S. air strikes in support of AFP operations.

These rules of engagement went beyond the U.S. role on Basilan in 2002. There was no comparable Marine and naval air capability off Basilan. The plan for SOF to go on patrol with AFP units restricted U.S. troops to use their weapons only for self-defense. That plan never was implemented on Basilan. Moreover, the Basilan operation contained a deadline of July 1, 2002, whereas Pentagon officials asserted that the Jolo operation would have no time limit.

President Arroyo and AFP commanders reportedly had agreed to the plan in a meeting of February 4, 2003.<sup>40</sup> The announcement of the plan caused immediate controversy in the Philippines. Filipino politicians and media organs criticized the

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<sup>38</sup> Vuillanueva, Mirichu and Pareno, Roel. Arroyo Scolds US General. *Philippine Star* (internet version), July 11, 2002. New US-Philippine Exercises Against Rebels Planned. Reuters News Agency, July 20, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Graham, Bradley. U.S. Bolsters Philippine Force. *Washington Post*, February 21, 2003. p. A1.

<sup>40</sup> Nakashima, Ellen and Graham, Bradley. Missed Signals Forced Suspension of U.S.-Philippine Mission. *Washington Post*, March 3, 2003. p. A12.

plan as violating the constitutional prohibition of foreign troops engaging in combat on Philippine soil.<sup>41</sup> Filipino Muslim leaders warned of a Muslim backlash on Mindanao. Filipino experts and civic leaders on Jolo warned that the people of Jolo would not support a U.S. combat role, partly because of the history of U.S. military involvement on the island. During the Philippine wars following the U.S. annexation of the Philippines in 1898, U.S. forces commanded by Generals Leonard Wood and John J. Pershing conducted extensive combat operations against Muslim forces on Jolo, inflicting thousands of civilian casualties. President Arroyo reacted to these criticisms and warnings by asserting that the U.S. role on Jolo would be to train and advise under AFP jurisdiction but would not involve combat. The Bush and Arroyo administrations decided to put the plan on hold and re-negotiate the rules of engagement of U.S. forces. It was reported that President Arroyo decided to postpone implementation of any plan until after a U.S. war with Iraq and that U.S. and Philippine planners were considering locations other than Jolo.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Nakashima, Ellen. Philippines Debates U.S. Combat Role Against Rebels. *Washington Post*, February 23, 2003. p. A30.

<sup>42</sup> Pareno, Roel and Mendez, Christina. Reyes: RP-US Balikatan Deal Done in One Month. *Philippine Star* (Internet version), March 28, 2003. Villanueva, Marichu. More Conservative Terms for Balikatan 03-1 Sought. *Philippine Star* (Internet version), March 23, 2003.