

MILF Seeks Leverage as Fighting Against Abu Sayyaf and MNLF Escalates

Publication: Terrorism Focus Volume: 4 Issue: 27

August 14, 2007 03:35 PM Age: 3 yrs

By: Zachary Abuza

On August 3, U.S. federal agents arrested Rahmat Abdhir, a 43-year old dual Malaysian national working as a computer engineer in California. In the 16-count indictment, he was charged with providing material support to a designated terrorist, Zulkifliir Abdhir (aka Zulkifli bin Hir or Marwan)—a senior leader of Jemaah Islamiya (JI), currently based in the southern Philippines—and Rahmat's younger brother (Terrorism Focus, April 3). Rahmat was in frequent e-mail contact with Zulkifli, and sent him more than \$10,000, and also packages of materials, including ammunition clips, two way radios, rifle scopes, uniforms and other equipment. Perhaps the most interesting part of the indictment was e-mail correspondence between Zulkifli and Rahmat's brother that sheds some important light on the very complicated dynamics of the ongoing relationship between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), hardline elements within the MILF and JI. The spate of fighting between the MILF and government forces in June-August puts the relationship into further context.

Malaysian authorities labeled Zulkifli as a leader of the Kumpulan Mujihiddin Malaysia (KMM), although he was really a mid-level JI operative and designated as such by the U.S. government on March 27, 2007. He fled Malaysia to Mindanao in the southern Philippines around August 2003 and was given sanctuary by hardline members of the MILF in the Liguasan Marsh area. He lived for several years in Pikit, under the protection of Ustadz Ameril Umbara Kato, the head of the 106th base command, and Wahid Tondok, head of the 109th base command. Following the arrest of another Malaysian national named Zulkifli, who was in charge of JI's training in the southern Philippines, he became a trainer. With the expulsion of JI's two senior-most operatives—Dulmatin and Umar Patek—from MILF territory in late 2004, Zulkifli became the lead liaison with the Philippine separatist group.

As the peace process between the MILF and the government became deadlocked in late 2006, the cease-fire started to unravel. There were spates of bombings across Mindanao in September and October 2006, and January, June, July and August 2007. The prime suspect in the bombings was Abdulbasit Usman, whom the government alternatively identified as a member of the MILF or a renegade member of the MILF. The MILF denied that he was currently a member of the organization. Yet, according to Zulkifli, by January 2007 he and Abdulbasit Usman were living under the protection of Wahid Tondok's men.

There remains many skeptics as to why the MILF would engage in a continued, though low-level, campaign of bombings while it is involved in the peace process. Some blame the violence on lost commands of rogue MILF commanders. Yet, the MILF's own spokesman, Eid Kabalu, clarified that there is no such thing as a "lost command. Either you are a member or you are outside of the MILF." The troops in Basilan are clearly within MILF command and control, and the decision to break the cease-fire was a rational choice.

The reality is that the peace process has been stagnant for some time now. The two sides remain bitterly divided over the area to be included in the proposed Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, and the Philippine government was unable to make concessions in the run-up to the May 2007 election. Even following those polls, the formal talks have yet to begin and the window for talks is closing quickly, as the long Ramadan and Christmas months near. It is doubtful that Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo will be able to get any agreement passed by the congress or even supported by her own government and military. It is no secret that MILF hardliners see the proposed agreement as a sellout of the group's objectives of an independent homeland and remain concerned that the protracted peace process is dissipating their military readiness.

The MILF were willing to provoke a major encounter in Basilan on July 11, in a joint operation with a large contingent of Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) fighters (whose presence they deny) that resulted in the death of 14 Philippine Marines, 10 of whom were beheaded (Philippine Daily Inquirer, August 10). Since then, there has been a steady drumbeat of accusations and threats to return to all-out war. While neither side desires such an outcome, the MILF want to remind the government of the costs that they will inflict should that happen. The increase in bombings and cease-fire violations since 2006 should be analyzed in that context: leverage to force the government back to the negotiating table, and at the same time as an omen of tactics that will be employed should war resume.

The MILF agreed this week to reposition forces on Basilan to allow the Philippine armed forces to continue operations against the ASG, but few expect the MILF to stop giving them sanctuary (Mindanews, August 9). The government must also contend with the fact that the 1996 agreement with the MNLF is starting to come undone, with two different MNLF units in 2007 picking up arms, one of which seems to have joined the ASG in the mountainous hinterland of Jolo. August 9 saw the heaviest fighting against the ASG and MNLF elements in a year, which led to the deaths of over 50, including 26 soldiers (Philippine Daily Inquirer, August 10). President Arroyo ordered her troops to "fight on" and the military announced that it was dispatching another two battalions to Jolo (Reuters, August 10).

With three distinct rebel groups and factions thereof, a weak central government and an armed forces unable to solidly defeat the rebels, the prospects for a durable peace in the southern Philippines look dim.

[Email this article to a friend](#)

The Jamestown Foundation
1111 16th St. NW, Suite #320, Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202.483.8888 | Fax: 202.483.8337 | pubs@jamestown.org

Site By New Village Media | © 2010 The Jamestown Foundation