

Manila Bombing Highlights Possible Shift in ASG Strategy

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On the evening of November 13, a remote control bomb attached to a motorcycle was detonated at one of the entrances of the Philippine Congress in Manila, killing Congressman Wahab Akbar and three other staffers. A Philippine National Police spokesman said: "It looks like Congressman Akbar was the target." Secretary of the Interior Ronaldo Puno reiterated that the investigation points away from a terrorist attack and is "more of a directed assault on a certain individual" (Philippine Daily Inquirer, November 14). No group has issued a definitive claim of responsibility, but motorcycle bombs are commonly used in the southern Philippines archipelago of Mindanao. A militant named Abdul Mushaf claimed responsibility on behalf of the Islamist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), but a leading Abu Sayyaf commander denied Abdul Mushaf was a member of the group—a fact confirmed by police—while refuting all responsibility for the attack (ABS-CBN TV, November 14).

Raids in Manila on the night of November 15 led to the killing of three suspects and the capture of three others. Those arrested, suspected members of Abu Sayyaf, were charged with murder. Congressman Akbar, 47, was a two-time governor of Basilan Province, an island in the troubled Muslim south of the country. While he was often critical of the administration of President Gloria Arroyo, Akbar was supportive of the government's efforts to eradicate the ASG. The congressman was previously a guerrilla leader in the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a Muslim insurgent group that signed a peace agreement with the government in 1996. In the early 1990s, Akbar was also known to have ties to ASG founder Abdurrajak Janjalani, though he denied ever being a member (Mindanews, November 15).

Akbar cut ties with the militants following the 1996 peace agreement, his foray into electoral politics and the ASG's degeneration into a criminal gang. The congressman was outspoken in his condemnation of the terrorist tactics of the ASG. In 2002, U.S. Special Forces assisted their Philippine counterparts in driving Abu Sayyaf off Basilan. Akbar was supportive of the counter-terrorism efforts of the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. military's operations in neighboring Sulu Island, which led to a sharp reduction in the number of terrorist incidents. In the past two years, however, the ASG have been trying to return to Basilan. Akbar's backing for the combined offensive clearly earned the ire of Abu Sayyaf.

If the ASG were in fact responsible for the Manila bombing, it would be the first time it has engaged in the targeted assassination of a high-profile political leader in Manila. On the run in the south, the ASG were in need of a successful operation to restore their prestige. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have been on the offensive for over a year now on Jolo Island, where a number of Abu Sayyaf leaders were slain in 2006. The number of troops on Basilan has been increased since a clash last July with Abu Sayyaf and units of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). That incident led to the death of 14 AFP soldiers, including 10 who were beheaded. The ASG has been able to perpetrate small bombings in central Mindanao in the last two years, such as the double bombing in a market in Kidapawan that killed two and wounded 26, but they have not executed a headline-grabbing attack in several years. It is a time of considerable flux in the region, with the government in the midst of finalizing an agreement for a Muslim autonomous region on Mindanao Island with the MILF, possibly paving the way for a full peace agreement in 2008 (Manila Standard Today, November 19).

The police cleared Akbar's political rival, Gerry Salapuddin, of any involvement in the bombing, though one of the detained suspects, Ikram Indama, was Salapuddin's former driver. Salapuddin, also a former MNLF commander, had lost the gubernatorial election in Basilan to one of Akbar's three wives (Philippine Daily Inquirer, November 18).

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