

## Zulkifli bin Hir: JI's U.S.-Trained Engineer

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On March 27, the U.S. government added Malaysian national Zulkifli bin Hir to its list of most wanted terrorists. At the same time, it upped the bounty on his head to US\$5 million (Sun-Star, April 2). Zulkifli (aka Marwan) was born in Muar, Johore, Malaysia on January 5, 1966. Zulkifli, who is a U.S.-trained engineer, comes from a family of jihadists. His younger brother, Taufik bin Abdul Halim (aka Dany), was involved in the 2001 Atrium Mall bombing in Jakarta, in which he lost his own leg and was subsequently convicted. Malaysian authorities assert that Zulkifli was a leader of the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), although many contend that the KMM was not an independent organization but simply a wakalah (agency) of Jemaah Islamiya (JI). The U.S. government asserts that Zulkifli is also a member of JI's central command.

Zulkifli fled Malaysia to Mindanao in the southern Philippines around August 2003. Either the 106th or 109th Base Command of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) gave him sanctuary. Following the arrest of another Malaysian national named Zulkifli, who was in charge of JI's training in the southern Philippines, he became one of the top trainers. With the expulsion of JI's two senior-most operatives, Dulmatin and Umar Patek, from MILF territory in late 2004 or early 2005, Zulkifli became the lead liaison with the Philippine separatist group. He is still thought to be in MILF territory, and was implicated in a string of bombings across central Mindanao in 2006. Working with a possible renegade MILF member, Abdulbasit Usman, Zulkifli launched the bombings to destabilize the MILF-GRP peace process and in revenge for government offensives against the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), who had given sanctuary to the two JI leaders. After two bombings on August 10, 2006 attributed to JI and MILF hardliners, police searched for Zulkifli bin Hir and another JI militant in Pikit, Maguindanao. Before they could arrest Zulkifli, they came under fire from MILF forces, leaving two policemen dead. It was an unusual violation of the cease-fire on the part of MILF and indicative of the lengths they would go to protect their JI charge.

The U.S. Embassy in Manila stated in a press release that Zulkifli "has been present in the Philippines since August 2003, where he is believed to have conducted bomb-making training for the Abu Sayyaf Group" (Sun-Star, April 2). While members of the ASG may have been through the MILF/JI training camps, there is limited evidence whether Zulkifli has ever been deployed with or protected by the Abu Sayyaf. The embassy's statement, unsurprisingly, downplays his relations with the MILF for the sake of the peace process, emphasizing his relations with the Abu Sayyaf Group. Likewise, on March 31, Armed Forces of the Philippines' Chief Gen. Hermogenes Esperon Jr. announced that Zulkifli is now in Sulu along with Dulmatin and Umar Patek. Again, this statement is likely to be politically motivated. When presented with evidence that Zulkifli was last sighted in Central Mindanao, Esperon replied: "We [have] some reports to that effect" (The Philippine Star, April 1). Recently, Marine Maj. Gen. Ben Mohammad Dolorfino conceded, "He [Marwan] is still in Central Mindanao along with Abu Sayyaf militants. But they are always mobile. I don't think he is being protected by MILF rebels. If we will link him with the MILF, it will disrupt the ongoing peace process" (GMA News, March 28).

In addition to Zulkifli, other top JI leaders at large are: Dulmatin, Umar Patek, Zulkarnaen, Qotada, Nu'im, Abu Dujana and Noordin Mohammad Top.

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