

Key leader of the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement arrested

Date: 30 August 2008

Location: Manila, Philippines

On 30 August 2008, the Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) of the Philippines presented to the media Ruben Pestano Lavilla, better known by his alias Sheikh Omar of the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM). Sheikh Omar was arrested on 24 July 2008 in Bahrain where he was working as an editor of a local magazine and was even hired as an interpreter at the Philippine Embassy. His arrest and deportation to the Philippines was made through the efforts of the Anti-Terrorism Council Coordinating Center Team (ATC-CC) and Philippine law enforcement agencies.



Figure 1 Photograph of Ruben Lavilla alias Sheikh Omar of the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM) when he was presented to the public on 30 August 2008 in Camp Crame, the national headquarters of the Philippine National Police (PNP)

Authorities said that Sheikh Omar was arrested after he applied for a loan at a local bank in Bahrain.¹ His identity was discovered by the bank after conducting credit investigation and found his name in the sanctioned list of the United Nations Security Council.² The security check also found he had outstanding warrants for murder and rebellion in the Philippines³ and that documents he had submitted were questionable. According to the ATC, Sheikh Omar is facing criminal charges for rebellion before the Regional Trial Court in Makati City and multiple frustrated murders before the Regional Trial Court in Cotobato City.⁴

¹ “Philippines say militant leader arrested in Bahrain”, Reuters, 30 August 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSB40061220080830>

² “Authorities present alleged 2004 Super Ferry 14 blast mastermind” ABS CBN News, 30 August 2008, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/topofthehour.aspx?StoryId=129752>

³ “Philippines arrests suspect in ferry bombing”, International Herald Tribune, 30 August 2008, <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/08/30/news/Philippines-Terror-Suspect.php>

⁴ “Key Rajah Solaiman Movement member falls”, GMA News TV, 31 August 2008, <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/117237/Key-Rajah-Solaiman-Movement-member-falls>

Details of the arrest were not immediately made public. The deportation process took a month to be completed, including the confirmation by the Bahraini government of the existence of the Philippines arrest warrants, the creation of a team to bring Sheikh Omar back to Manila and other preparations that would conform to the international law on human rights.⁵

Background

Sheikh Omar is regarded as the “Grand Mufti Qadi” in the Philippines as well as the Sheikh Mufti of the radical Balik Islam community or Islamic converts. He co-founded the RSIM in 2001 along with Hilarion “Ahmad” Santos III and sits on the Central Committee of the RSIM. He served as an adviser to the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and as a lecturer and adviser at the Islamic Information Center (IIC) which was the front for the terrorism financing activities of the RSIM. The RSIM has been included in the United States list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists on 16 June 2008.

Sheikh Omar is the only Islamic leader in the Philippines who can issue a verdict pertaining to punishment “in the service of Islam”. He is considered as one of the top ideologues of the RSIM which claimed affiliation with the Al Qaeda linked regional terrorist groups Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu Sayyaf Group.⁶ He is said to be the brains behind the 2004 Super Ferry 14 bombing in Manila which left 116 people dead and is believed to have been involved in the planning and execution of the 2005 Valentine’s Day bombings. Authorities also said that Sheikh Omar may have been involved in the planning of several bomb attacks on the United States Embassy in Manila, all of which were disrupted by the Philippine National Police.⁷

Analysis

The arrests of its key leaders and the disruption of its funding activities from 2005-2006 have significantly affected the capability of RSIM to launch terrorist operations. However, the potential for the groups’ revival is still there due to the active networking of several radical Balik-Islam personalities- former leaders, preachers and support networks of the RSIM said to be based in the Middle East. The arrest of Ruben Lavilla alias Sheikh Omar is seen as a significant boost for the counter-terrorism campaign of the Philippine government and could be a major deterrent for the RSIM to regroup and reconsolidate its ranks.

*Prepared by: Diane Russel Ong Junio
Research Analyst*

⁵ “Philippines arrests suspect in ferry bombing”, International Herald Tribune, 30 August 2008, <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/08/30/news/Philippines-Terror-Suspect.php>

⁶ “Ferry bomb terror suspect held in Manila”, CNN, 30 August 2008, <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/08/30/philippines.suspect/>

⁷ Ibid