

The Kidnapping of the Red Cross Representatives in Sulu

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On 15 January 2009, representatives from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Andreas Notter, 38, of Switzerland, Eugenio Vagni, 62, of Italy, and Mary Jean Lacaba, 37, from the Philippines were abducted by five armed men in Jolo, Sulu. The three checked on a water sanitation project in the Jolo provincial jail and had just left on board a Red Cross vehicle around 1130H when five armed men stopped them at gunpoint and drove with them to Indanan, Sulu--about 30 kilometers from Jolo. The Red Cross staff, along with the armed men, then walked to an unspecified location where Abu Sayyaf gunmen led by Albader Parad and Abu Pula are encamped. Authorities later identified one of the armed men as Raden Abu, a disgruntled prison guard who recently lost his job at the Jolo provincial jail. Abu is reportedly a relative of Parad.

The abduction followed a sharp increase in kidnapping in Sulu and Basilan beginning October 2008. It is Sulu province's most high-profile kidnapping case since the June 2008 abduction of a media personality and the 2000 kidnapping of 21 mostly European tourists from a resort in Sipadan, Malaysia by Sulu-based Abu Sayyaf members led by Parad and Abu Pula.

The Abductors' Demands

Initially, the abductors demanded for military operations to stop. Later, they reportedly asked for Php5M (\$110,000).¹ But in a letter handed to Sulu Vice-Gov. Lady Anne Sahidulla--a distant relative of Parad--during a breakthrough meeting on 28 January,² the abductors asked for "livelihood assistance" and denied having asked ransom or amnesty.³ They also demanded for *military pursuit operations to stop, for negotiations to start* and for the *Crisis Committee to be abolished*.⁴ The letter, which was written in English, was signed by Abu Pula, Radullan Sahiron and Parad.⁵

Parad voiced similar demands later but asked that the group negotiate with Vice President Noli de Castro. Parad also named other persons in the negotiating "entourage:" Senator Richard Gordon, the ambassadors of Switzerland, Italy and Qatar, Sulu Gov. Abdusakur Tan and the Sulu Vice-Gov.⁶ Parad denied the group asked for ransom or livelihood assistance but stressed they wanted negotiations that should be similar to the 2000

¹"Government maintains no-ransom policy for kidnapped ICRC staff," 31 January 2009, GMA News, <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/146733/Govt-maintains-no-ransom-policy-for-kidnapped-ICRC-staff>

²"Sulu governor advises kidnappers: Form co-op," 31 January 2009, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20090131-186682/Sulu-gov-advises-kidnappers-Form-co-op>

³"AFP checking validity of alleged Abu Sayyaf letter," 3 February 2009, GMA News, <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/147111/AFP-checking-validity-of-alleged-Abu-Sayyaf-letter>

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶"Abu Sayyaf want De Castro in talks," 04 February 2009, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, <http://www.inquirer.net/specialfeatures/redcrossabduction/view.php?db=1&article=20090204-187281>

Sipadan hostage crisis “where the military withdrew, the negotiators were able to come in and there was no armed encounter.”⁷

The Government’s Response

A multi-agency crisis committee in Sulu known as the Task Force-ICRC oversees ongoing rescue efforts. When it had been apparent that negotiations are the only way to ensure the hostages’ safety, the task force, which is headed by Sulu Gov. Tan, took the lead in negotiations despite the government’s policy against it. The task force, nonetheless, reiterated the government’s no-ransom policy and warned that any ransom would be used by the Abu Sayyaf to buy more weapons.⁸ Previous kidnapping incidents, however, involved ransom of at least \$2M (Php94M) for each captive.

A military solution does not appear to be the Task Force’s probable course of action. The government and the Armed Forces said they are against full military operations. Pressure increased when the abducted Red Cross staff appealed for the government to exhaust all means to safely recover them.⁹ The call was made after the abductors’ demand to negotiate with the Vice President had been rejected.¹⁰ As of 6 February, government troops and civilian volunteers are closely positioned against the Abu Sayyaf in *Barangay* (village) Lanagas in Indanan.¹¹ This could prompt hostilities, which could lead to full-scale combat. The military has earlier said that operations might be suspended to give way to negotiations. But the task force has yet to advise suspension of military operations.¹²

Implications

The Red Cross abduction has shown that aid and humanitarian workers will not be spared by armed groups such as the Abu Sayyaf. Foreigners, particularly those from internationally recognized organizations such as the Red Cross, remain valuable targets for abduction. Like previous cases of kidnapping involving foreigners, the widespread recognition--which had been evading the group since its leaders were killed in 2006--provide the Abu Sayyaf viable leverage in attaining its goals: *to acquire more funds, dislodge military offensive and recruit more members*.

The kidnapping of the Red Cross workers is also severe setback for Sulu and Basilan, which are poised for further growth after gaining relative peace. Both provinces again face the challenge of ensuring peace and order if they hope to attain development while facing dimmer prospects of gaining future investments and development aid. The people in Sulu

⁷Ibid.

⁸“Government maintains no-ransom policy for kidnapped ICRC staff,” 31 January 2009, GMA News, <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/146733/Govt-maintains-no-ransom-policy-for-kidnapped-ICRC-staff>

⁹“Kidnapped ICRC Team’s Appeal: ICRC workers: ‘Find way to pull us out.’ The Philippine Daily Inquirer, 5 February 2009, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view/20090205-187564/ICRC-workers-Find-way-to-pull-us-out>

¹⁰“Palace Says De Castro won’t negotiate with Abus,” 4 February 2009, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view/20090204-187452/De-Castro-wont-negotiate-with-Abus>

¹¹Ibid.

¹²“Military poised to move on Abus,” 6 February 2009, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20090206-187686/Military-poised-to-move-on-Abus>

and Basilan, on the other hand, would again be subjected to a military offensive as a result of the recent kidnapping. Ordinary civilians, who have recently become targets, would not only face the threat of abduction but also the prospect of leaving their homes when pursuit operations begin.

Meanwhile, calls to fully address this decade-long threat have raised the need to re-examine the kind of engagement among stakeholders in Sulu and consider how best to ensure cooperation in addressing the province's concerns. For example, the local government may want to consider closely coordinating with the influential Moro National Liberation Front in its attempt to finally take out the Abu Sayyaf through current efforts at revisiting the 1996 peace accord. Aid and humanitarian workers, on the other hand, may also need to consider coordinating with the country's security forces when going in high-risk areas. This has gained particular importance with the recent kidnapping because a military offensive was ongoing at the time of the ICRC team's visit.

Meanwhile, due to the extensive coverage of the incident, negotiations could involve personalities eyeing lucrative posts in the 2010 elections. This and the overriding statements of various officials could obscure the accountability of the local government for the kidnapping incident and the outcome of the ongoing crisis. Although the issue warrants attention, it is futile to hope for tangible results from the national government when it is beset with equally important concerns and its capacity limited to allocating resources. Incidentally, magnifying a local peace and order problem conforms to the goals of the Abu Sayyaf and the Jemaah Islamiyah militants holed out with them in making the Red Cross abduction appear it had been religiously or ideologically-motivated.

Finally, the "more dominant" assertions from the military suggest that they lead the rescue efforts and that a highly unpopular military solution would be employed. As a result, the security forces would perpetually take much of the responsibility in addressing a peace and order problem brought about mostly by poor social conditions and bad governance. Local governments of Sulu and Basilan would go on unscathed in their failure to deliver basic services and ensure close coordination with law enforcement authorities. Kidnapping or lawlessness would then thrive, with the Abu Sayyaf and other armed groups proving even more elusive.