

Report on the Marine Beheadings in Basilan 10 July 2007

OVERVIEW

The Island of Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippine Archipelago erupted in violence yet again on 10 July 2007 when troops from the Philippine Marine Corp clashed with fighters from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The controversy was further fanned when 10 of the Marines corpses were found beheaded and mutilated. This enraged the military and the Government of the Republic of Philippines (GRP).



Members of the Moro Islamic liberation Front (MILF)

The response from Philippine President Glorio Macapagal Arroyo was to declare an ultimatum for the MILF to turn in those among its ranks who perpetrated the killings by 22 July 2007. Simultaneously, she sent more troops to the region in an attempt to weed out the killers. This result was a face off between the Armed Forces of Philippines (AFP) and the MILF brewing in the Jungles of Basilan. At the same time moderates within the two factions called for restraint and patience.

Approximately, 1000 families were displaced by the initial fighting and if events escalate, an impending internal displacement problem threatens to further push back the region into times past.

Information about the incident as it trickles out actually brings more questions than answers in this ongoing saga. What is needed now is a thorough, unbiased

and prompt investigation into the incident and a detailed sharing of information with all the players.

HOW IT BEGAN

The MILF and the AFP had been conducting joint operations to rescue the abducted Italian priest Giancarlo Bossi¹ since his abduction on 10 June 2007 up until 3 July 2007. The MILF then abruptly announced that they will be withdrawing their forces from the search. The military was then slated to go it alone. The reason provided by the MILF was that an accord which allowed them to conduct joint operations with the AFP had expired.²

Then on 9 July 2007, Philippine Marines from the 1st Marine Brigade were deployed to the island of Basilan particularly in the Tipo-Tipo municipality after receiving intelligence that the abducted Italian priest Bossi was being held there. AFP troops had been combing the Lanao provinces and Zamboanga del Sur for weeks prior to the deployment in Tipo-Tipo.



Map of Basilan Island from US Pacom

¹ Italian priest, Giancarlo Bossi, who was in Payao Town, Zambaonga Sibugay province of Southern Philippines to do missionary work was kidnapped on 10 June 2007. He was held for 40 days and finally released by his captors on 20 July 2007 at about 9pm in Lanao del Norte province. Chief superintendent Jamie Caringal, Director of the Western Mindanao Police said the suspect group was an MILF faction run by Akhidin Abdu Salam aka Commander Khidin. Bossi on the other hand claimed his kidnappers told him they were from the Abu Sayyaf.

² A joint communiqué ratified on 6 May 2002 between the MILF and GRP announced the formation of an Ad Hoc Joint Action group (AHJAG). Its purpose was co-operation “for the isolations and interdiction of criminal elements operating in, or near, MILF communities and areas”. The guidelines for this corporation expired on 22 June 2007. The coordinated search for Bossi was under the auspice of this agreement.

At about 4.30 a.m., on 10 July 2007 about a hundred Philippine marines were deployed to the thick jungles to locate Bossi. Force Reconnaissance marines were forward deployed to reconnoiter two objectives. They were supported by more marines behind in holding positions. The search continued for hours without success and the ground commander ordered the men back to camp. While the marines were en route to the marine headquarters in Isabella one of their vehicles got bogged down in the mud. While some of them attempted to free the vehicle some of the marines took up a defensive perimeter around the area. This defensive perimeter is a common military practice whenever there is a halt in movement so as to be ready for an ambush. They encountered a large number of armed men, who were later identified as elements of the MILF, maneuvering in the thick vegetation. There were reportedly upwards of 300 MILF fighters. The MILF commander on the ground that day, Ustadz hud Limaya claimed that they saw the marines moving in a threatening posture by taking up defensive positions which led them to believe that they were under attack. The MILF further added that if the marines had stayed on the road they would not have been fired on³.

Almost instantly a firefight began at approximately 10.30 am. Limaya also confirmed that they had fired upon the marines first to cease the initiative. "Better we get them first before they get us", said Limaya.⁴

According to the 9 member panel looking into the incident, at about 11.00 am, the AFP commander on the ground, Major Minandang Macatoon called Satar Ali who is a member of the Local Monitoring Team (LMT) of the peace process, to inform him of the ongoing battle. Satar Ali also received similar instructions from MILF Coordinating Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH) chair, AL-Haq. Satar Ali tried to call the MILF commanders on the ground to ceasefire but could not get through to them as the commanders were at a mobile phone 'dead

³ 'Cell phone dead spot doomed troops', Inquirer, 27 August 2007
http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view_article.php?article_id=84843

⁴ Ibid

spot' where the signal could not get through. Major Macatoon also called Dr. Safrullah Dipatuan of the MILF Adhoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) for assistance but Dr. Safrullah said it would be difficult to intervene as the mandate for the AHJAG had expired.⁵

Next a series of failures sealed the fate of the marines. Helicopter gunships called in for close air support failed their mission. A bomber plane activated to aid the marines had to return to base after running out of fuel. Nothing short of a ceasefire affected by the power brokers on the ground could save the marines after that.

Sometime after 5 pm a ceasefire finally came. According to the panel report Sattar Ali had finally convinced the MILF commanders to ceasefire. The marines out numbered and unprepared for night time battle simultaneously chose to withdraw.⁶ According to an MILF probe, at about 8 pm the marines informed the MILF that all the equipment and dead marines were withdrawn from the contact point. It was only at this time that the 9 wounded marines were recovered. One hour later, at 9 pm the marines again contacted the MILF and informed them that 10 marines were unaccounted for. According to the MILF probe its fighters then denied holding any marines captive.

The next day, 11 July 2007, the MILF proceeded to the contact point and found up to 6 dead marines and one dead civilian beheaded and mutilated. The dead civilian was identified as one Ustadz Matarul Hakim Alkanul, a partially blind Imam from the village in Guinata, where the gun battle took place.

⁵ ibid

⁶ 'Eyewitness account: Seven hours of hell in Tipo-Tipo, Basilan', 16 July 2007
<http://www.gmanews.tv/story/51234/Eyewitness-account-Seven-hours-of-hell-in-Tipo-Tipo-Basilan>

INITIAL RESPONSE

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)

Almost immediately on the 11 July 2007, the MILF took responsibility for the encounter with the marines. Abu Majid, the MILF information officer alleged that the marines had infringed on the cease fire agreements by encroaching on the territory of the MILF. Specifically, the MILF claimed the marines did not coordinate between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines-Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (GRP-CCCH) and the MILF-Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (MILF-CCCH) about their movements in the MILF controlled territory. According to the MILF, the massing of troops not part of normal movements is also a violation of ceasefire agreements. The MILF also accused the marines of entering known MILF territory, Al-barka, despite the warnings of area Congressman Wahab Akbar, Mayor Hajarun Jamiri and the town police chief of Al-barka.⁷

The MILF claimed to have killed 23 marines, (9 more than the marines claim of 14 killed in action) captured 27 firearms and destroyed two 6x6 vehicles but



Philippine marines loading casualties on to a truck

denied any responsibility for the beheadings or mutilation of the dead marines. On their side they claimed to have suffered 4 killed in action and 7 wounded.

⁷ 'MILF to Defend Self in Basilan', Luwaran, 14 July 2007
<http://www.luwaran.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=350>

Three days after the incident the MILF announced that it constituted an investigative team to look into the beheading of the Philippine marines as the act of mutilation of a fallen enemy is prohibited in Islam and the Geneva conventions. It also announced that the investigative team will also look into the killing of the Imam, Ustadz Matarul Hakim Alkanul.

The investigative team reported its initial findings on 16 July 2007⁸ and subsequently released a full report of the incident on 25 July 2007.⁹ In it, the team accused the marines of breaching the agreements of the ceasefire on three occasions just prior to the encounter in question.

- On 8 July 2007, marines entered Barangay in Limbu Upas, Tipo-Tipo about 3 kilometers from Barangay Ginanta.
- On 9 July 2007, the same outfit conducted a follow up operation and entered Barangay Linuan, Al-Barkah town
- 10 July 2007, marines entered Barangay Linuan again where they disarmed two MILF members, one of whom was dressed in clearly marked MILF uniform. The team also alleged that on this occasion one of the marines when reminded of their encroachment said, “we do not recognize any MILF area, the entire Philippines is ours”.

After father Bossi, who the marines were purportedly looking for, was released in Karumatan, Lanao del Norte province, the MILF deputy chairman of the committee on information sighted this as evidence that the military had intended all along to deliberately attack them in Basilan and had in fact orchestrated a search and rescue mission to cover their malicious intent.

⁸ MILF releases initial findings on Basilian; calls for int'l human rights probe, Luwaran.com, 16 July 2007

<http://www.luwaran.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=355>

⁹ “The Basilan Encounter: From the result of the MILF’s Fact Finding Investigation”, Luwaran.com, 30 July 2007 <http://luwaran.com/images/news/statement1.jpg>

In the same breath the MILF also called for restraint on the part of the government asking that time be given to investigators to conclude their investigations.

Government Response

The official response from the Military and the Government was mixed and often contradictory.

On the one hand military responded by immediately sending out a statement accusing the MILF of joining forces with “lawless elements” in conducting the attack. They also alleged that ASG members who had been holding Bossi were hiding in MILF territory at the behest of the MILF.¹⁰ A commanding officer of the 1st Marine Battalion told reporters that he was certain the ASG members led by Isnilon Hapilon were at the battle ground that day.

This was similarly echoed by The National Security Advisor and acting Defence Secretary Norberto Gonzales who gave the MILF an ultimatum to either surrender those responsible for the killing of the marines or face a full military retaliation in Mindanao.¹¹ The Chief of Western Mindanao Command (Wesmincom) Lieutenant General Eugenio Cedo, responsible for military operations in that area, similarly echoed this sentiment.

In what seemed like preparation to carry out this threat, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo ordered more troops to be sent to Basilan. She even commissioned her personnel security detail, 65 members of the elite Presidential Security Group (PSG) to join the marines already stationed there.¹² By 27 July 2007, three battalions of Marines and an Army battalion were already in Basilan

¹⁰ ‘14 Marines killed in firefight with MILF rebels’, *Manila Bulletin*, 12 July 2007
<http://www.mb.com.ph/issues/2007/07/12/MAIN2007071297618.html>

¹¹ ‘Gov’t to MILF: Surrender Marine killers by Sunday’, *INQUIRER.net*, 21 July 2007
http://archive.inquirer.net/view.php?db=1&story_id=77965

¹² ‘PSG men off to Basilan to hunt killers of Marines’, GMA News TV, 21 July 2007
<http://www.gmanews.tv/story/52033/PSG-men-off-to-Basilan-to-hunt-killers-of-Marines>

in anticipation of the hostilities. Two days later that number had increased to five marine battalions and two Army battalions.¹³

Contrastingly, the Chief of Staff of the AFP Hermogenes Esperon Jr. attempted to play down tensions. He said that there was no plan to launch an all out war even if the deadline passes without development but he said the MILF is responsible for turning in those responsible for the mutilations¹⁴ or they will have to use one of ten options available to them, an all out war being the last of them.¹⁵

In another example of a contradictory response, the government called for international human rights groups to probe the clash in Tipo-Tipo. National Security Advisor Noberto Gonzales even personally requested Malaysia, the lead in the International Monitoring Team (IMT), to conduct its own probe into the clashes. While in the same breath the military announced that it would be filing criminal charges against those responsible for the killing of the Marines during the clashes. The Philippine National Police (PNP) also similarly drew up charges against those responsible for the death of the marines. The PNP went a step further, specifically identifying the 114 base command and the Abu Sayyaf as being responsible for the killings. A Basilan court issued arrest warrants to 130 suspects based on police investigations.¹⁶ (Both the AFP and the PNP delayed the charges later to allow for the CCCH to continue with their enquiries.)

¹³ 'AFP: Learning from Mistakes?', Newsbreak, 29 July 2007

http://www.newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3527&Itemid=88889008

¹⁴ Esperon: All-out war vs MILF is last option
GMA News TV 16 July 2007

<http://www.gmanews.tv/story/51248/Esperon-All-out-war-vs-MILF-is-last-option>

¹⁵ 'AFP gives MILF ultimatum to surrender Marines' killers', *Sun Star*, 19 July 2007

<http://www.sunstar.com.ph/breakingnews/2007/07/19/afp-gives-milf-ultimatum-to-surrender-marines%e2%80%99-killers-738-pm/>

¹⁶ 'Cops welcome delay in arrest of Marines' killers', GMA News TV, 01 August 2007

<http://www.gmanews.tv/story/53721/Cops-welcome-delay-in-arrest-of-Marines-killers>

Why this apparently uncoordinated dual approach? The military and marines in particular have a very strong gung-ho, proactive culture. They did not want to sit passively after 14 of their 'brothers' have been killed and their corpses mutilated, acts which can be seen as a direct challenge to the marine corps . They could not wait on the sidelines while a diplomatic solution is explored.

The Arroyo government has already had its run in with the military in 2003¹⁷ and again in 2006¹⁸. The government did not want to keep the military on a short leash, afraid that it will turn on the government. Instead, the government allowed the marines and the military in general some slack in exercising its need for its own response in typical military fashion. However, the government did realize that the risk of a full frontal assault will put in jeopardy any success it has made in the southern region thus far. The pictures of any dead Muslim, fighter or civilian is likely to fan anti-government sentiments in the embattled south pushing the governments plans for the region back by years.

On 25 July 2007, the first sign of hostilities appeared. The government took the initiative. News reports suggested that the military Chief of Staff, Hermogenes Esperon had ordered the military to conduct surgical strikes at the MILF and Abu Sayyaf in a bid to weed out only those responsible for the killings and the beheadings.¹⁹ It is difficult to fathom how selective attacks can be carried out without escalating the situation into a full scale war between the two parties, especially since the both the military and the MILF have amassed troops in a hair trigger situation.

¹⁷ On 27 July 2003, 321 Philippine soldiers took control of an apartment building in Makati city. They wanted to highlight the corruption of the Arroyo government. The soldiers were unable to garner sufficient support and the attempted coup ended 18 hours later.

¹⁸ On 22 February 2007 14 junior military officers were arrested for plotting a coup. The coup was part of a larger plot codenamed Oplan Hackle. Brigadier General Danilo D. Lim of the Scout Rangers was put under the custody of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. The president then declared a state of emergency. Several arrest including of marine commanders quelled the tension and the state of emergency was lifted on 3 March 2006.

¹⁹ 'Military Conducts Selective Attacks vs MILF: report', Sun Star.com, 25 July 2007
<http://www.sunstar.com.ph/static/net/2007/07/25/military.conducts.selective.attacks.vs..milf.report.html>

Possible Motives

Attacks by the Moro separatists in the past demonstrated that they will defend their territory fiercely. These attacks also share similarities with the incident of July 2007.

On 10 January 2005, MILF forces attacked an army detachment in Mamasapano, a town in Maguindanao Province about 900 kilometers, or 550 miles, south of Manila. Eid Kabalu, the spokesman for the MILF claimed that the attack was in retaliation for the killing of their commander Abdul Rahman Bides Binago at the hands of the AFP in a gun battle the week before. He added that the attack was not sanctioned by the MILF. The Philippine military accused the MILF elements of aligning with Abu Sofia, a kidnap for ransom gang to conduct the attack. In that incident six AFP soldiers and 13 rebels were killed.²⁰

On 18 July 2005, MILF forces fired upon a military helicopter partially damaging it and injuring one soldier on board. The helicopter was over MILF territory in pursuit of Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members when they were fired on. Similarly, on 14 July 2005, 3 soldiers were killed in a gun battle with MILF forces when the soldiers broke into a MILF camp. The military claimed that the soldiers were in pursuit of ASG members.²¹

More recently, on 10 March 2007, Philippine Army troops and MILF forces clashed in Barangay Dapiawan, Datu Saudi Ampatuan in Maguindanao. In this attack about 150 MILF fighters attacked a detachment of the Philippine Army's 602 Infantry Brigade near the Barangay but the army troopers managed to repel

²⁰ 'Rebel sally kills 19 in Philippines', The Associated Press, Reuters, 10 January 2005
<http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/01/10/news/manila.php>

²¹ 'Soldier wounded in chopper attack', *Sun Star*, 17 July 2005
<http://www.sunstar.com.ph/static/zam/2005/07/17/news/soldier.wounded.in.chopper.attack.html>

the attack. Mr Kabalu said that no attack was sanctioned by the MILF leadership.²²

The military alleged that the 10 March attack was motivated by revenge for an earlier encounter between the two entities on 5 March 2007 which resulted in the death of 17 MILF fighters. In that incident, about 300 MILF fighters armed with rocket propelled grenades attacked an army detachment of the 602 Infantry Brigade in a remote village in North Cotabato.²³

However, these past attacks do not demonstrate the propensity for mutilation of corpses.

The MILF and the local mayor, Jakilan Karam suggested that one possible reason for the manner in which the marines were found was the killing of an Imam just hours before the encounter, believed to have been perpetrated by the marines. The Imam, Ustadz Matarul Hakim Alkanul, was seen with the marines on the morning of 10 July 2007, hours before the firefight. The body of the Imam was found alongside the dead marines with his limbs bound, with multiple bullet wounds, deep lacerations in his back and with his throat slashed. The Imam could have been informing on positions of the rebel factions and lawless elements.

The similarly brutal nature of another incident makes a pertinent comparison. On 19 July 2007, a muslim missionary from Barangay Balagtasan in Lamitan town was killed, his body chopped into pieces and placed in a sack. The Imam was believed to be informing on the Abu Sayyaf.²⁴

²² 'Woman killed in fresh fighting in Maguindanao', *ABS-CBN*, 10 March 2007
<http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/storypage.aspx?StoryId=69482>

²³ '17 MILF rebels, soldier killed in clash in southern Philippines', *Xinhua*, 06 March 2007
http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200703/06/eng20070306_354890.html

²⁴ 'Muslim informant killed in Basilan', *ABS-CBN News*, 19 July 2007
<http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/storypage.aspx?StoryId=85119>

Moro culture equates the killing of another muslim much less an Imam as a grave crime. Any such acts will swiftly draw a collective vendetta meted out by the entire community.

Contradicting the above theories that the Imam was informing on rebel movements the daughter of the Imam told the investigating panel that her father was helping the marines to free their bogged down truck. She later said that she saw her father's hands bound with a red nylon rope. A clear perspective on the Imam's death is unlikely for sometime as the perpetrators will be subject to harsh criticism and even retaliation. The panel will be wise to avoid providing more fuel to the fire by announcing the identity of the killers.

Even the beheading of soldiers is not a completely new occurrence. In February 1993, the bodies of 21 Marine officers were mutilated and 3 were beheaded after an encounter with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in Tuburan Town in Basilan Province. Like the latest incident the MNLF claimed that the beheadings were perpetrated by "lawless elements" post encounter. Nur Misuari, the chairman of the MNLF, like in the present incident claimed that the encounter was a legitimate one. Therefore, territorial Defence could be another possible motive for the encounter. The MILF considers its lands sacred ancestral land. The marines have entered these lands with impunity previously thus enraging the Moro community and the separatist in particularly.

The more commonly narrated scenario is one where ASG militants entered the battleground after the ceasefire was in effect and beheaded the marines post battle. Lending weight to this argument was the report released by the 9 member panel probing the incident. It cited two eye witness reports stating that ASG leaders Suwaib Kalibun, Nurhasan Jamiri, Umair Indama and Buhari Jamiri were seen beheading the corpses. The eye witnesses also claimed to have informed

the perpetrators that it was against Islamic law to carry out such acts but were threatened at gun point for their troubles.

CONCLUSION

In February 2006, during talks in Georgetown, Malaysia on the contentious issue of sharing the ancestral land between the Philippine Government and the MILF the two parties seemed close to an agreement. However, in September 2006 talks broke down when the Government refused to accede to the



Military funeral for the marines killed in Basilan

MILF's request to add a larger number of villages to the Autonomous region. The MILF wanted more than 1000 villages while the government was only willing to give 613 villages. The fight for territory is the primary concern for the Moro separatist and so the peace process deteriorated from there.

It is unlikely that the police or the military will be able to apprehend those responsible for the killings or the subsequent mutilations. It is also easy to presume that the Abu Sayyaf is the likely perpetrators of the beheadings and mutilations because it has a history of carrying out such acts. The lines between who is MILF, Abu Sayyaf or lawless breakaway factions have blurred and it will be difficult for the security forces differentiate them. Besides, the records of beheadings are as old as the insurgency itself long before there was any distinction of Abu Sayyaf or MILF.

Fortunately, the current tension is not likely to scuttle the peace process completely. The peace process is something both the GRP and the MILF want to continue. But the problem herein lies in the control of certain elements on both sides that see the talk of peace as submission.

Even within the MILF the central committee lacks control of its periphery. Many loyalties are drawn along tribal lines and so a local commander is free to define his own objectives and alliances. Many in the MILF see the failure of a earlier exercise at peace, the Tripoli Agreement with the MNLF as justification to loosely define the terms of the ceasefire.

One thing is for certain. These incidents will continue as long as the important issues as spelt out by the Tripoli Agreement and the Jakarta Agreement continue to remain unfulfilled by the Philippine government.

Written by:

Vishnu Varathan

Research Analyst