



## INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND TERRORISM RESEARCH

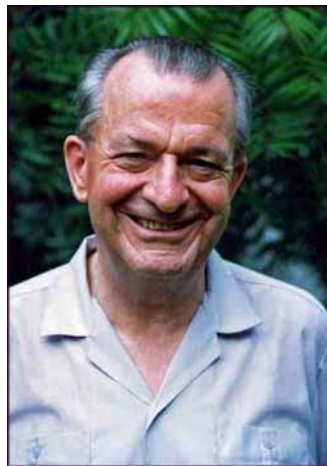
A Centre of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

### Spot Report on the Kidnapping of Irish Missionary Father Michael Sinnott 11 October 2009

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#### The Incident

On 11 October 2009, Father Michael Sinnott, an Irish missionary from the Society of Saint Columban Missionary, was kidnapped at about 7:30 pm (local time) inside the Columban House in Gatas District in Pagadian City, province of Zamboanga del Sur.<sup>1</sup> As he was taking an evening stroll in the garden, six armed men burst in, took Fr. Sinnott at gunpoint into a mini-van with license plate GBL 687 and drove to a local beach in Santa Lucia village.<sup>2</sup> The authorities later found the vehicle abandoned and torched. Quoting a witness, Marieta Burok, the group boarded a small vessel and heading towards the town of Tukuran, Zamboanga del Sur.<sup>3</sup> Burok saw the priest being led to a motorized boat wearing only jogging pants.<sup>4</sup> *“His front and back were bloodied. He was dragged to a waiting pump boat,”* Burok said.<sup>5</sup> But contrary to earlier reports, the military claimed that the gunmen who took the priest sped in the direction of Karomatan (not Tukuran), a known stronghold of the MILF.<sup>6</sup> The Moro rebel group has been waging a separatist rebellion since 1978. Peace talks with the group have been on hold since August 2008.



Fr Michael was born in Barntown, Co. Wexford in 1929. He was ordained in 1954 and following studies in Rome, was assigned to Mindanao, Philippines in 1957. He served in Mindanao until 1966 before he was transferred to Dalgan Park, Navan as a theology staff.

He returned to the Philippines in 1977 where he has served in a variety of pastoral and administrative roles. For the last four years, he was running a school for children with hearing difficulties

*(photo courtesy of the Columban Missionary)*

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<sup>1</sup> “Irish Catholic priest kidnapped in Pagadian,” CBCP News, 11 October 2009,

<http://www.cbcnews.com/?q=node/10799>

<sup>2</sup> Alipala, Julie. “Abu Sayyaf eyed in kidnap of Irish missionary,” Inquirer.net, 12 October 2009,

<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/regions/view/20091012-229658/Abu-Sayyaf-eyed-in-kidnap-of-Irish-missionary>

<sup>3</sup> “Gunmen abduct Irish priest near Pagadian city,” ABS-CBN, 11 October 2009, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/regions/10/11/09/gunmen-abduct-irish-priest-south-military>

<sup>4</sup> “Search on for kidnapers of Irish priest,” Agence France-Presse, 12 October 2009, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/regions/10/12/09/search-kidnapers-irish-priest>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## Tactics and Impact

Abductions have been a prominent tactic used by groups in the country. Since the start of the year, there has been an increase in the number of hostages.

In nearby Sulu and Basilan, abduction followed a sharp increase beginning October 2008. In January this year, three Red Cross workers were kidnapped by the Abu Sayyaf in Sulu. It is the 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.

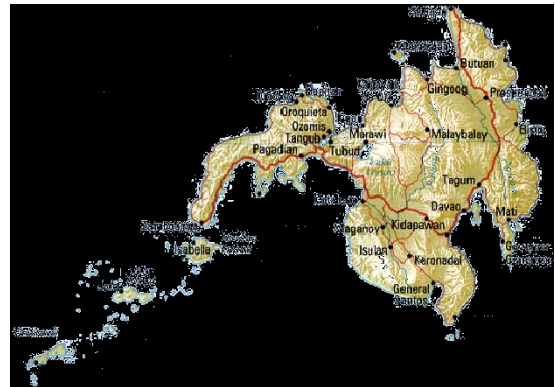
Since 1991, the Abu Sayyaf Group has directed most of their attacks against Christian churches, Catholic priests, missionaries and non-Muslim communities apart from conducting raids and ambushes against police and military outposts and convoys. For its kidnapping-for-ransom operations, targets in previous incidents carried out by the group include Americans, Germans, French, Malaysians, Taiwanese and Filipino-Chinese tourists or traders.

## Group Responsible

No one has claimed responsibility for the abduction, although previous kidnappings targeting foreign missionaries and tourists have been blamed on the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The police and military are also looking into the possible involvement of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).<sup>7</sup>

In 2007, the Abu Sayyaf kidnapped Italian priest Giancarlo Bossi, also near Pagadian City, and held him for over a month before freeing him, allegedly after the payment of ransom.

Another Italian priest, Guiseppe Pierantoni, was abducted by the same group as he was celebrating mass in a church in Zamboanga del Sur in 2001.<sup>8</sup> He was safely rescued by troops after six months.



*Photo courtesy of Sky News*

<sup>7</sup> "Search on for kidnappers of Irish priest," Agence France-Presse, 12 October 2009, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/regions/10/12/09/search-kidnappers-irish-priest>

<sup>8</sup> "Gunmen barged into convent and kidnapped Irish priest in Philippines," Fox News, 11 October 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,564000,00.html>

In 1998, a third Italian priest, Luciano Benedetti, was kidnapped by suspected Muslim militants in Zamboanga del Norte province then freed after several weeks, reportedly in exchange for a huge ransom.<sup>9</sup>

## Security Response

A Provincial Crisis Management Committee has been formed to facilitate the recovery of the Fr. Sinnott. Zamboanga del Sur Governor Aurora Enerio-Cerilles will head the committee.<sup>10</sup> Also members of the committee are representatives from different government agencies and non-government organizations. According to Major General Romeo Lustestica, commander of the First Infantry Division based in Pagadian, the kidnapers have not demanded any ransom and has not made contact with the crisis committee.<sup>11</sup> The military as a support agency to the crisis committee and the Philippine National Police (PNP), flashed an alarm to all its units, alerted all checkpoints and deployed seaborne patrols.<sup>12</sup>

Morning after the incident, police have launched a region-wide manhunt operations against the abductors of Fr. Sinnott. All Western Mindanao police units have been told to launch pursuits and set up checkpoints for the victim's immediate rescue.<sup>13</sup>

Manhunt operations are concentrated on three Mindanao regions. The regions are the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), Region 9 or Western Mindanao and Region 12 or Central Mindanao.<sup>14</sup> According to Police Director Felizardo Serapio Jr. of the Directorate for Integrated Police Operations in Western Mindanao, there were indications that the group responsible was based in central Mindanao.<sup>15</sup> Serapio refused to name the suspected organization because of the sensitive nature of the situation. Also the PNP is preparing the sketches of the kidnapers, since there were two witnesses to the incident.

In recent months, the military has unleashed huge offensives against the Abu Sayyaf in nearby Sulu province. These have led to the arrests of several ASG members and the capture of a major rebel camp and many casualties on both sides.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Evangelista, Katherine, "Crisis committee formed to find priest, abductors," Inquirer.net, 12 October 2009, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/regions/view/20091012-229667/Crisis-committee-formed-to-find-priest-abductors>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> "Regionwide manhunt launched for kidnapers of Irish priest," Inquirer.net, 12 October 2009, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/regions/view/20091012-229680/Regionwide-manhunt-launched-for-kidnappers-of-Irish-priest>

<sup>14</sup> "Efforts to rescue Irish priest focus on 3 Mindanao regions," Inquirer.net, 12 October 2009, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/topstories/topstories/view/20091012-229685/Efforts-to-rescue-Irish-priest-focused-on-3-Mindanao-regions>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

In the meantime the Department of Foreign Affairs has been in touch with the Irish government, through the Irish embassy in Singapore, which has jurisdiction over the Philippines.<sup>16</sup>

### **Assessment**

Fr. Sinnott's abduction comes nine months after the ASG snatched three Red Cross workers on the island of Sulu. Swiss national Andreas Notter, Italian Eugenio Vagni and Filipino Mary Jean Lacaba were freed one after the other in a hostage crisis that stretched on for six months.

As Father Sinnott is in poor health, it could be expected that this situation will be used by the kidnappers as leverage for their demands. While no group has claimed responsibility yet, the location where the group has reportedly been traced points to either the Abu Sayyaf or the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). But the probability of the incident being perpetrated by the ASG is more unlikely looking at past attacks, where the religious are not spared from being harassed.

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<sup>16</sup> DFA airs grave concern over kidnap of Irish priest," Inquirer.net, 12 October 2009, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/regions/view/20091012-229684/DFA-airs-grave-concern-over-kidnap-of-Irish-priest>