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Abu Sayyaf Group co-founder enters “guilty” plea in US trial

Date: 28 July 2010

Location: Washington DC, United States of America



A ranking member of the notorious Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Philippines has pleaded guilty to four counts of hostage taking filed in the United States District Court in Washington DC.¹ The defendant, Madhatta Haipe is also known as Mohammad Hatta Haipe and goes by the aliases Abdul-Aziz and Awliya. He was charged for his role in the 27 December 1995 kidnapping of sixteen people from a resort near Trankini Falls in Lake Sebu in South Cotabato in the southern Philippines island of Mindanao.² Haipe admitted organizing the kidnapping which includes four US citizens and one US permanent citizen as among the victims, the rest of whom were Filipino nationals.

US Assistant Attorney General for National Security, David Kris, was quoted saying “*For roughly fifteen years, FBI agents, Justice Department prosecutors and authorities in the Philippines relentlessly pursued this matter on behalf of the victims who were held hostage and threatened with death by this Abu Sayyaf leader*”.³ US officials believe that the case filed against Haipe will send a clear message that there are serious consequences for those who seek to commit harm against US citizens.⁴

¹ “Abu Sayyaf co-founder pleads guilty in US”, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 29 July 2010, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/news/breakingnews/view/20100729-283761/Abu-Sayyaf-co-founder-pleads-guilty-in-US>

² “Philippine abductions leader admits guilt”, UPI, 28 July 2010, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2010/07/28/Philippine-abductions-leader-admits-guilt/UPI-22281280364390/

³ “Abu Sayyaf co-founder pleads guilty in US”, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 29 July 2010, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/news/breakingnews/view/20100729-283761/Abu-Sayyaf-co-founder-pleads-guilty-in-US>

⁴ Ibid

Background

Mohammad Hatta Haipe is originally from Zamboanga City in Mindanao. He is said to be currently 48 years old.⁵ While there is little information to be had about his formative years, he was described as a religious fanatic and was among those who founded the *Tabligh* group in Mindanao in the mid-1980's.⁶ Prior to joining the ASG as one of its founding members in 1992, he was a professor of Islamic Studies at the Mindanao State University.⁷ The ASG is a US-designated terrorist organization and is known to engage in kidnap for ransom activities where their main targets are usually foreigners, to raise funds for their operations. Haipe is said to be the group's second-in-command and at one point was the group's Secretary-General.⁸ He is said to have been involved with many of the group's kidnapping activities but was only charged for the aforementioned 1995 kidnapping. Haipe's participation in the kidnapping of US nationals was presented to a federal grand jury in Washington DC in November 2000 who indicted him on seven counts of hostage-taking with the use of firearms during a crime of violence and conspiracy.⁹

Haipe eluded arrest and it was reported that he was sent to Malaysia to help procure funds for the ASG.¹⁰ On 20 May 2009, Haipe was deported by Malaysian authorities back to the Philippines along with four other members of the ASG.¹¹ They were reportedly arrested in Malaysia for violation of the country's immigration laws and have spent several years in detention before they were deported.¹² Shortly after Haipe's arrival in the Philippines, he was taken into custody by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) based on a provisional warrant of arrest requested by the United States government who were working on his extradition for the kidnapping charges. On 27 August 2009, Haipe was extradited to the United States to face the charges filed against him.¹³

Impact

Haipe is now scheduled for sentencing on 14 December 2010.¹⁴ He could face up to life in prison on each of the counts he pleaded guilty to but as part of the plea bargaining agreement he entered

⁵ "Philippine Terrorist Operative Pleads guilty to Kidnapping charges", 28 July 2010, RTT News, <http://www.rttnews.com/Content/GeneralNews.aspx?Id=1374334&SM=1>

⁶ Personality Profile: Mohammad Hatta Haipe, ICPVTR Global Pathfinder Database last updated 10 March 2009.

⁷ "Madhatta Haipe Extradited to US for 1995 Hostage taking involving US and Philippine citizens", Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, 28 August 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2009/August/09-nsd-884.html>

⁸ Personality Profile: Mohammad Hatta Haipe, ICPVTR Global Pathfinder Database last updated 10 March 2009.

⁹ "Madhatta Haipe Extradited to US for 1995 Hostage taking involving US and Philippine citizens", Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, 28 August 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2009/August/09-nsd-884.html>

¹⁰ Personality Profile: Mohammad Hatta Haipe, ICPVTR Global Pathfinder Database last updated 10 March 2009.

¹¹ "5 Abu Sayyaf suspects back from Malaysia", Philippine Daily Inquirer, 21 May 2009, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20090521-206255/5-Abu-Sayyaf-suspects-back-from-Malaysia>

¹² "Malaysia turns over five Filipino terror suspects", Taiwan News, 20 May 2009, http://www.etaiwannews.com/etn/news_content.php?id=954614&lang=eng_news

¹³ "Madhatta Haipe Extradited to US for 1995 Hostage taking involving US and Philippine citizens", Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, 28 August 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2009/August/09-nsd-884.html>

¹⁴ "Founding member of Abu Sayyaf Group pleads guilty to 1995 hostage taking involving US and Philippine citizens", Yahoo News, 28 July 2010, http://news.yahoo.com/s/usnw/20100728/pl_usnw/DC42402_1

into, the US government may advocate for a 25 year prison sentence.¹⁵ Haipe's arrest and conviction could serve to further strengthen the working relationship between the US and Philippines government especially on counterterrorism efforts. There are no indications however of how much of an impact his sentence would have on the ground. For the past several years, the ASG has been the target of the Philippine military and police, many of its members are either arrested or on the run. The newly-elected Aquino government has yet to outline its plan of action against the ASG but the past administration has been vocal that it would not enter into negotiations with the group because it is a purely criminal organization and not motivated by political beliefs.

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¹⁵“Founding member of Abu Sayyaf Group pleads guilty to 1995 hostage taking involving US and Philippine citizens”, Yahoo News, 28 July 2010, http://news.yahoo.com/s/usnw/20100728/pl_usnw/DC42402_1