

Letter from Mindanao

Tough-talking President-elect Rodrigo Duterte is extending an olive branch to the large Islamist groups here: autonomy for their southwestern region. But the offer excluded the small and lethal Abu Ssayyaf separatist group. Its trademark kidnap-for-ransom raids will continue to plague Mindanao, meaning that the region should remain off-limits for Western tourists, businessmen and other affluent, discretionary visitors.



Both Duterte and his successor, President Benigno Aquino, vowed, thus far in vain, to destroy the agile separatist group, which numbers 300 to 500 operating from the jungles of Jolo and Basilan islands in the southwest. In the month before leaving office, Aquino even moved additional battalions of troops and police into position in Mindanao as a run-up for some sort of incursion into Abu Ssayyaf's island strongholds. But given its arsenal, the geography and local support, such action would be costly.

Over decades, the Abu Ssayyaf group has effectively used mortars, improvised explosive devices and automatic rifles to assassinate or kidnap victims in their self-proclaimed fight for Islamic independence in the Philippines.

Since its founding in 1991 with the help of Al-Qaeda, Abu Ssayyaf has committed some of the Philippines' most infamous terror attacks and gruesome murders. Its leaders have now pledged allegiance to Islamic

State but authorities insist they are more focused on seaborne kidnappings for ransom than setting up a caliphate.

Launched by a Filipino who fought alongside Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan, the group was named after an Afghan mentor of Bin Laden, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. Its stated goal: Islamic control of a large part of Mindanao, which is 90 percent Muslim. During the early struggles, a series of Abu Sayyaf leaders were killed, but after the 9-11 attacks in the U.S., the group gained international exposure for a notorious ferry bombing in February 2004.

After the owners of the Superferry firm refused to pay a demand for protection money, an Abu Sayyaf operative rented a berth on the Manila-Mindanao Superferry 14, planted a television filled with 8 pounds of explosive, set the timer and left the 900-passenger ship before departure. The bomb went off around midnight in Manila Bay, sinking the ferry and taking 116 lives - the most horrific terrorist act at sea in recent memory.

At that point, the group increasingly relied on ransom and protection money to fund its operations. Indeed, many analysts and security officials maintain the group is more about money than any ideological or religious motivation. The terrible sinking of Superferry 14 has caused many to also suspect that on-going protection rackets are another steady source of income.

Targeting transporters, moreover, may also give Abu Sayyaf kidnappers further intelligence about travelers (potential targets) coming into their operational territory.

Small in number by the standards of the principal insurgent groups in the Philippines, such as the Islamic Moro Liberation Front (MLF) and the Communist New People's Army (NPA), Abu Sayyaf's image-conscious members have parlayed their command of social media and propaganda about their lightning attacks to great effect; huge ransom demands, good-quality video pleas by the hostages, subsequent beheadings and other IS-style methodology burnish their self-proclaimed status as an Islamist terror group.

The early link to Al-Qaeda worked for the group's leaders for more than a decade and brought financial aid, but their successors upgraded their threat profile and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014. Black

IS flags began showing up in Abu Sayyaf videos and publicity photos of young fighters armed with M-16s and M-60 machine guns.

Although many Filipinos have been kidnapped for ransom, the new international link to the Islamic State and the need to increase the group's revenue likely prompted Abu Sayyaf to turn to foreign hostages for ransom.

Earlier this month, word came of the group's latest beheading of a foreign hostage: about 40 minutes past the ransom deadline on June 15, it was reported that Canadian Robert Hall had been killed. In a show of bravado, Hall's head was transported by motorcycle about 30 kilometers or more and deposited at a local church. Assuming the Philippine military and police had roadblocks or at least checkpoints during this period of heightened alert, the pair of motorcyclists arriving in the center of town made a point about the reach of Abu Sayyaf. Nor was this the first time the group had done that with a victim.

Hall's murder was foreshadowed by staged videos of him pleading for the \$16.6 million ransom demand to be paid. His countryman, John Ridsdel, suffered the same fate in April, after making similar video pleas for the \$8 million ransom being demanded for him.

Hall and Ridsdel were two of three prominent Westerners with Hall's Filipina girlfriend seized in a daring insurgent raid last September, on an upscale marina formerly considered secure, close to the new president's hometown of Davao, where he was mayor for 22 years.

By the time of his capture, Hall had become a familiar figure at the marina. The beauty of the Philippines and tranquility of Davao may have deceived him. Hall had arrived in the Philippines in March 2015 on his way to Thailand but ended up staying in Mindanao with his local girlfriend, Marita Flors. By the time of the kidnapping, they had stayed five months at the local Holiday Oceanview Samal.

Abu Sayyaf was probably tipped off about the presence of Western victims there, and sent some dozen armed insurgents, several with M-16s, to descend on the Samal Yacht Club Marina. The attackers gathered the hostages together, herded them into an 80-foot outrigger with two outboard motors and sailed 300 miles back to the Abu Sayyaf island of Jolo.

The southern Philippines are no place for a Westerner to be well-known; and in the dirt-poor area, virtually any Westerner is perceived to be prosperous. As a British IT executive returning home from General Santos City on Mindanao reported at the time of the Marina kidnapping, the local police chief had confided to him a chilling detail: all foreign visitors are checked out in the south by the insurgents. They pay attention to all, he said.

The Marina kidnappers recently released Ms. Flors. Abu Sayyaf still hold the Norwegian marina manager Kjartan Sekkingstad, also abducted in the raid on the resort, as well as a Japanese treasure hunter kidnapped in 2010 and a Dutch bird watcher taken in 2012. Although two occurrences do not add up to a pattern, it is worth noting that in both the Samal and an earlier kidnapping in Sandakan, Saban, the managers of the enterprises were taken as well.

In the Sandakan attack, Malaysian businessman Bernard Then Ted Fen and a woman were kidnapped from a seaside Chinese restaurant in Sandakan, also about 300 kilometers (180 miles) from the Abu Sayyaf island of Jolo. A Malaysian newspaper reported that Then's hostage-takers received the full ransom for both him and restaurant manager Thien Nyuk Fun. She was released but Abu Sayyaf asked for more money for Then. When negotiators failed to meet this new demand, he was beheaded in November 2015.

Fourteen Indonesian fishermen were kidnapped earlier this year and a ransom was paid. The reported ransom for the first ten Indonesians was 50 million pesos (\$1.07 million) and for the later four Indonesians 15 million pesos (\$325,000). In another Abu Sayyaf show of bravado, the kidnapped Indonesians were dropped off at the governor's mansion on Jolo.

A few weeks later, perhaps because of the ransom in the Indonesian case, a Malaysian tugboat with a crew of four was hijacked. The boat was released, presumably after payment of a ransom, and weeks later the crewmen from Sarawak were released. Malaysian officials said no ransom was paid, but this created a media backlash as supporters of the crewmen said they had donated to the ransom fund and wanted to know when they would get their cash back. The government was stuck. Eventually Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi admitted that RM 12 million (roughly \$2.9 million) was paid for the four. He added that the money was not given to Abu Sayyaf but made as a

donation to other unnamed Muslim groups on Mindanao, which “assist in an Islamic struggle”, according to one widely circulated local report.

Despite this potentially sour note for relations between the countries, the predominantly Christian Philippines and mostly Islamic Malaysia, along with Indonesia, have been cooperating to clamp down on Abu Sayyaf’s sea-borne piracy. Recently the three neighbors agreed to extend their joint boat patrols and set up a hotline to deal with attacks by the group, which has launched raids into Malaysia and attacked Indonesian ships at sea.

So the new president, the first one from the country’s south, might be banking on the twin pressures of such united regional action and Abu Sayyaf’s exclusion from the peace process and isolation from the other Islamist groups to weaken it decisively or prompt it to the peace table.

There are signs the strategy might be working. An Abu Sayyaf leader has said that the group might be willing to enter into talks with the government if certain conditions were met. At the same time, the insurgent leader warned that if no progress was made, another of the group's hostages would be executed.

Such threats are not likely to be popular with the blunt-spoken, new president, who in the past has threatened death for drug dealers and terrorists alike. The long-time mayor of Davao, “Mayor Rody,” as he is widely known here, livened up the campaign trail with profanity and tough talk in his speeches as well as lurid jokes and curses that even targeted the pope. He has been compared to U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump, although Duterte insists he abhors him.

The new president is also making some deft social media moves of his own to help blunt and discredit the insurgent kidnap threat. He also advocates a federal form of government to reduce Manila’s control over Islamic Mindanao.

Duterte, who used a “knuckle sandwich” fist logo as his presidential campaign symbol, has vowed to eliminate corruption and illegal drugs. To this end, he has offered to negotiate with both armed Muslim groups as well as the New People’s Army (NPA). The NPA has also been campaigning and assassinating people to eradicate corruption and drug dealing.

As Duterte prepared to take office on June 30, NPA raiders captured a police chief near Davao. At first, Duterte asked NPA to free the chief, but after learning the man stood accused of protecting major drug dealers in his area, Duterte said the man was on his own to face an NPA kangaroo court.

Some political opponents have claimed the new president would wink at NPA “Sparrow Squads” if and when they assassinate drug dealers and corrupt politicians. Similar arrangements with Moro insurgents, they speculated, might also work to cripple Abu Sayyaf.

It is an open secret that some locals on Abu Sayyaf’s island strongholds are participants - perhaps as shareholders - in the kidnap enterprise. Their small part, as a sentinel or transporter or hostage host, can earn them hard currency in a rather hard-scrabble society of poor hill tribes living without running water or electricity.

There are reports from the area, presumably from released hostages, that kidnapers leave victims with different clans for safekeeping during negotiations. The recipient families eventually receive a cut of the ransom, while the assailants hide their weapons and blend into the countryside. The few roads and rugged jungle hills allow for the insurgents to receive ample warning of any approach by Philippine troops or police.

But under the new president, the days of impunity for insurgent and other kidnapers may be numbered. Already the president, or those acting with or without his tacit approval, have started to make good on one of his showcase campaign pledges, to rid the country of drug dealers. Since June 30, police, vigilantes or rivals have killed an estimated 200 suspected dealers.



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