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April 5, 2009

By Richard Bennet

On Thursday the terrorist group, Abu Sayyaf, released one of the three Red Cross workers being held hostage on the island of Jolo in the southern Philippines. Tuesday had seen the deadline for the beheading of one captive come and go without event. Philippine marines advanced on the terrorist position despite calls from international organizations that they pull back from their positions in the Sulu archipelago in compliance with the kidnappers' demands.

It has been over 11 weeks since the three Red Cross workers were abducted. Media coverage of Abu Sayyaf demands has provided extensive exposure for the group, and mistakenly characterizes the organization as negotiating from a leveraged position. This is far from the case. If one looks at the history of terrorist organizations in the Philippines, it's apparent that recent actions indicate the relative success of the Philippine Government's campaign against Abu Sayyaf and related groups.

Kidnappings for ransom, or KFRs in military parlance, are not a new invention in the southern archipelago of the Philippines. In 2001 Abu Sayyaf abducted 20 people, including three Americans. Government forces were able to kill or capture all of the kidnappers, though one American was beheaded and another was killed in the rescue attempt. There is no doubting the dangerous nature of these groups and the threats the remaining hostages face.

The extensive media coverage over the past weeks, much of it critical of the government's assertive actions, has served to raise the profile of the kidnappings, aiding the terrorists' information operations campaign by bolstering its image at a time when its influence in the Sulu archipelago has diminished greatly.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, agreements with the Moro National Liberation Front restricted the reach of the government's armed forces to the primarily Christian town of Jolo City. Abu Sayyaf gained significant strength in the 1990s until an increase in kidnappings compelled further action on the part of the Philippine Marines. Recently, however, the trip to Jolo finds roads newly secured from terrorist activities, and the provincial government is increasingly taking a role in the daily lives of local citizens.

Government gains over the past few years have been significant and not limited to security improvements. With the guidance and support of the US Military and USAID, the Philippine Government and its armed forces have conducted a classic counterinsurgency campaign, taking a population-centric approach with limited direct combat action and an emphasis on development and good governance.

Improvements in security and the political situation can be tied directly to government-sponsored projects, whereas prior action had included battalion sweeps that alienated the populace. Running up the body count often can lose the support of the local population. In this densely interwoven clan-based society of the southern archipelago, trust is difficult to win. Collateral damage in the form of innocent lives lost is not an easy wrong to right.

KFRs are a targeted weapon in the information campaign of Abu Sayyaf and other terror groups; more importantly, however, they signify the dire straits in which many of these organizations find themselves. Abu Sayyaf, Jemaah Islamiyah and other associated groups turn to kidnappings as a last resort after their revenue lines - many with Saudi ties - have dried up. Kidnappings are a far cheaper way to obtain revenue and public attention as recruitment numbers decline and their freedom of action grows more limited.

Over the past several years, one can draw parallels between the increase in kidnappings that follow periods of government success; when Abu Sayyaf enjoys freedom of action in the absence of a persistent government approach, the result has been a series of larger, more deadly terrorist attacks, like the bombing of the Superferry in 2004 that took more than 120 lives.

Last fall, Major General Juancho Sabban, the commander of the Philippine Marines' operations on Jolo, noted, "The main reason we are now winning in that area is because of the shift in strategy. We conduct civil-military operations, we address poverty - We have to educate people to change their mindset, to show the younger generation what is right and wrong. They see their parents kidnap foreigners, so they think it's a local activity. If there are other opportunities, it doesn't have to be."

In the immediate term, the utmost care must be applied to the safe rescue of the remaining two Red Cross captives. In the longer term, however, similar kidnappings ought not to be seen as reflecting good terrorist propaganda, but rather should be indicative of the dire financial situations in which many of these transnational terror organizations find themselves. Much of the Moro Islamic fighters' activities have been reduced from terrorism to criminal activity. By continuing to focus on the corruption and social inequality, the counterterror efforts in the Philippines stand to consolidate recent gains.

The southern archipelago of the Philippines has come a long way since the late 1990s when Abu Sayyaf, Jemaah Islamiyah and other al Qaeda-linked groups fostered dreams of establishing the caliphate by starting with the islands of Basilan, Sulu, Tawi Tawi and Mindanao. The latest kidnappings are more indicative of a desperate gasp than a viable future for the Islamists in the region.

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