

Marawi – A Tri-Border Reality Check?

Capt. Martin A. SEBASTIAN RMN (R)
Centre Head/Senior Fellow
Centre for Maritime Security and Diplomacy
Maritime Institute of Malaysia (MIMA)

1. Introduction

On 23 May 2017, three Islamic militant groups attacked Marawi City. The three groups were the *Abu Sayaff Group* (ASG) led by Isnilon Hapilon, the *Maute Group* (MG) led by Abdullah Maute, and the *Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters* (BIFF), a disgruntled breakaway group from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MG, originally linked to Jemayah Islamiyah (JI), pledged allegiance to ISIS and made Butig the HQ for ISIS operations for local and foreign militants.

The April 2016 issue of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) weekly newsletter *Al Naba* noted that Isnilon was appointed as the "Emir" of all ISIS forces in the Philippines while the Jakarta based *Institute of Policy Analysis for Conflict* stated that Southeast Asian terrorists in Syria pledged allegiance to the new "Emir". According to Rohan Gunaratna, a security expert at Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, "ISIS is shrinking in Iraq and Syria, and decentralising in parts of Asia and the Middle East".

2. Uniting for Revenge

MOST WANTED TERRORIST

ISNILON TOTONI HAPILON

Conspiracy to Commit Hostage Taking Resulting in Death; Hostage Taking; Murder of a United States National Outside the United States; Hostage Taking Resulting in Death; Conspiracy to Use and Carry a Firearm During a Crime of Violence; Using and Carrying a Firearm During a Crime of Violence; Aiding and Abetting and Causing an Act to be Done

DESCRIPTION

Aliases: Abu Musab, Sol, Abu Tuan, Isnilon, Salihuddin, The Deputy, Deputy Amir	Place of Birth: Bulana, Lanao, Basilan, Republic of the Philippines
Date of Birth: March 18, 1986	Eyes: Brown
Hair: Brown	Weight: 120 pounds
Height: 5'6"	Complexion: Light-skinned
Build: Slim	Citizenship: Filipino
Sex: Male	Scars and Marks: Hapilon has facial birthmarks.
Languages: Tagalog, English, Yakan	

REWARD

The Rewards For Justice Program, United States Department of State, is offering a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading directly to the apprehension or conviction of Isnilon Totoni Hapilon.

REMARKS

Hapilon graduated from the University of the Philippines School of Engineering. Hapilon may travel to Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

CAUTION

Isnilon Totoni Hapilon was indicted in the District of Columbia, for his alleged involvement in terrorist acts against United States nationals and other foreign nationals in and around the Republic of the Philippines. Hapilon allegedly served as deputy or second in command for the group terrorist organization, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). This organization of armed individuals already took the foreign nationals hostage and committed violent acts against them to include murder.

SHOULD BE CONSIDERED ARMED AND DANGEROUS

If you have any information concerning this person, please contact your local FBI office or the nearest American Embassy or Consulate.

Field Office: Honolulu

Source: US Justice Department

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) conducted several operations under the orders of President Duterte to eliminate Islamic militancy. On 21 Feb 2016, Omar and Matti Maute, brothers of Abdullah Maute were killed by the AFP in Butig while Isnilon was seriously wounded when AFP attacked the militant base in January 2017. In an encounter on March 2017 at Poona Babayo, Lanao Del Sur Isnilon was reported to have been shot in the leg. The AFP also attacked BIFF strongholds suspected of harbouring foreign bomb-making specialists and killed several of them.

3. International Militant Support

With the IS leaders systematically were being purged by the AFP, it was time for a do-or-die all out attack by foreign and local Islamic militants. Indonesian officials believe some militants might have slipped into Marawi City under the cover of an annual gathering of the *Tablighi Jamaat* just days before the fighting erupted. The *Tablighi Jamaat* is a Sunni missionary movement that is non-political and encourages Muslims to become purer. Malaysians, Indonesians, Saudis, Chechens, Pakistanis and many other nationalists were already established in Mindanao ready to join ranks for the battle for survival.



Source: STRATFOR Worldwide

4. Assessment

a. The response by the government to the Marawi incident has cost millions of dollars' worth of military hardware, the cost of rebuilding the whole city from the destruction, and the cost to humanitarian response. These casualties bring memories of the Zamboanga incident and the Lahad Datu incident across the other side of the Sulu Sea. It only goes to show that whilst militants are good at guerilla warfare with snipers, rockets and improvised bombs, they can bring a city to its knees and effect costs to the government. They are therefore a force to be reckoned with and countries must learn from past experiences.

b. The rise of militancy in South East Asia was being warned by many Think Tanks; however, tri-border states were not sharing information on the movement of militants. The US\$5 million bounty on Isnilon Hapilon is also a cause for poor intelligence sharing among agencies resulting in an all-out fiasco. It brings to mind the SAF 44 incident when Malaysian terrorist, Marwan was killed in the controversial police operation in Mamasapano,

Maguindanao in January 2015. Some 60 people, including 44 policemen, were killed during the operation. Marwan had a US\$5 million bounty as well. The porous borders make things even worse for intelligence agencies. Experienced militants returning from Syria and Iraq are looking for the next action.

c. Sympathizers are abundant within the tri-border states. Sectarian divide in the Middle East has prompted funds from rich Middle East countries in support of extremist views. With political parties espousing more radical forms of Islam and with Sunni based Wahabbi Salafism spreading like wildfire, unregulated clerics in religious centres and schools, funds to support militancy and movement of militants have added to the issue in Mindanao and the whole region. The presence of so many foreign fighters is overwhelming.

d. The painfully slow process of the Peace Process in Mindanao has been used by militants to obtain support against the Government of Philippines. The Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) otherwise known as House Bill 4994, has been a work in progress since the Presidency of Aquino. On 2 June 2017, a new draft of the BBL was ready to be submitted for further action. Still, the pro-government revolutionary organizations like the MILF and MNLF have vowed to continue supporting the peace process. They have even pledged support for AFP operations in Marawi.

e. Though IS forces in Syria and Iraq are shrinking, there are still millions of dollars' worth of funds readily available being eyed by new militant groups. These funds, coupled with drugs, arms and human trafficking businesses in the tri-border area brings together militants and criminals, fueling corruption among government agencies.

5. Recommendations

a. Due to the costs involved in counter terror operations, governments should take militancy seriously and develop deterrence. A holistic approach is needed. The trained and experienced AFP is still finding it hard to react to militant offensives.

b. Tri-border states must come together and share experiences on inter-agency cooperation during counter terror operations to share best practices and prepare for contingencies.

c. Criminal elements like drug cartels, arms smuggling and human trafficking syndicates must be stamped out immediately to stop them from fueling corruption and militancy.