

Amir Lechner examines the rise to prominence of the militant Islamist Abu Sayyaf Group, which is resorting to kidnap for ransom to fund its operations in the Philippines

SCARE TACTICS

On 24 December 2009 Dr Orlando Fajardo, vice president of for academic affairs at the Basilan State College, was freed by his captors after his family paid them their "board and lodging" expenses of US\$2,150. Dr Fajardo was kidnapped for ransom two weeks earlier, and the initial ransom demand exceeded US\$430,000. During his debriefing, the victim told investigators he was treated well, but that his kidnapers had threatened him with beheading. This has generally been a trademark of the Philippines' notorious Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

His kidnapers are believed to be members of the same ASG cell which kidnapped three employees of High Tech Woodcraft Corp on 11 November 2009 in the town of Maluso, Basilan. The abductees included two Chinese nationals who managed the factory and a 20-year-old Filipino man who was later beheaded after his family and employer failed to pay the demanded 1.5 million Pesos (US\$32,500) ransom. His severed head was found a day prior to Dr Fajardo's release. A ransom of US\$281,500 was demanded for the Chinese nationals.

On 9 November, the severed head of a kidnapped elementary school teacher from Patikul, Sulu was found in a gas station on nearby Jolo Island. He was reportedly beheaded after his family failed to collect the two million Pesos ransom (US\$43,300) demanded for his release.

While there are several other notable groups blamed for the resurgence of kidnappings for ransom in the southern Philippines, many of the recent high-profile kidnappings can be traced to the ASG. Examples include the kidnapping of a Sri Lankan peace activist in February 2009, the kidnapping of three foreign International Red Cross (ICRC) employees in January 2009 and the

kidnapping of Ces Drilon, an ABS-CBN journalist and her TV crew in June 2008. In each of these cases, the victims were released after "livelihood assistance" was delivered to the ASG (in the case of the ABS-CBN crew the amount was estimated to be more than US\$335,000).

According to statistics provided by the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), there have been at least 42 kidnappings in the region between 1 January 2008 and 4 February 2010; seven of those were in the last month of that survey period alone. Of these seven incidents, five took place in Basilan Island and two in Sulu Island, both of which are ASG strongholds. In all, at least 12 cases were blamed on members of the ASG. It is estimated the group managed to extort close to US\$2m in ransoms. In response to this recent wave of kidnappings, the military initiated yet another massive campaign to eliminate both the ASG and violent cells of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Several clashes between the militants and security forces have resulted in casualties on both sides.

On 27 February 2010, a group of ASG members raided the Tubigan village, located on the island province of Basilan. At least one local militia man and ten civilians were killed and nearly 20 others wounded. The gunmen also set residences on fire. The attack is the worst since 2001 (when ASG members abducted dozens of Lamitan town residents and later beheaded nine of them). It is believed to be reprisal for the 20 February killing of ASG Commander Al-Bader Parad and the earlier capture of ASG logistics officers Jumadali Arad and Mujibar Alih Amon. Both of the detainees reportedly participated in the 2000 kidnapping of 21 Western tourists and staff from a

Malaysian resort, which brought the group to the attention of the international media.

The attack came a day after the Philippine police recovered the two Chinese managers mentioned above, with the aid of informants from the local population. As kidnapping for ransom is the ASG's main source of income, the attack on a purely civilian target might also have served as a warning to the local population, dissuading them from co-operating with the authorities.

The ASG has been behind a number of terrorist attacks recently, including the 21 January 2010 bombing of the house of a Basilan province mayor, the 29 September 2009 road bomb that killed two American soldiers and a Filipino marine in Sulu, the 8 October 2009 shelling of the runway on the Basilan Island near where the US counterterrorism troops are stationed, and a reportedly foiled attack earlier that week on the military airport base. Due to large military deployment in the Southern Philippines and its constant pursuit of the group members, however, the ASG is unlikely to revive itself to its earlier glory days and rise again to a become major militant group in Southeast Asia.

The ASG was established in the early 1990s; according to several reports its origins can be traced to the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the creation of the global Jihadi movement. It was established by Abdurajak Janjalani, a member of the Moro National Liberation Front (MILF), which was in turn one of the two main Muslim separatist movements in the southern Philippines. Janjalani fought as a Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, where he reportedly befriended Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda's leader. Upon his return to the Philippines, Janjalani split from the



SCARE TACTICS



The Philippines army, with US support, has disrupted ASG operations, but has not destroyed the group

► MILF after the latter negotiated with the Philippines government to stop the hostilities for an autonomous region in the southern Philippines.

The ASG was initially financed by Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, a Saudi businessman and Osama Bin Laden's brother in law, through the Benevolence International Foundation, an import export company he established in the Philippines. After Khalifa's arrest in the United States in 1994 he was extradited to Jordan where he was acquitted. He was later assassinated in Madagascar in 2007 while visiting a mine he owned there. In 2000, short on funds, the ASG turned to kidnapping-for-ransom and extortion operations to finance their activities.

Though ASG began as one of the Philippines' smaller militant groups, estimated to have as few as 100 members at the time of formation, the group has been quite active. Under Janjalani's extreme ideology and the group's successful bombing campaign in Mindanao, the group quickly recruited new members among the South's militants Muslims and grew to a force estimated at over 300 members.

In December 1998, Abdurajak Janjalani was killed during a shootout with police officers. His younger brother, Khadafi Abubakar Janjalani, assumed leadership of the ASG as a result. In 2002 the Philippine government launched "Operation Endgame" against the group, but failed to achieve its goal and eliminate them. A new operation – "Oplan Ultimatum" – was launched in August 2006 and resulted in the death of five senior

members and many of the group's foot soldiers. Khaddafy Janjalani was killed in September 2006, followed by the death of Abu Sulaiman (aka Jainal Antal Sali) in January 2007, during a firefight with soldiers on Jolo Island. The killing of Sulaiman was significant, as he is believed to be behind the worst terrorist attack in the Philippines – the bombing of SuperFerry 14 in 2004 which resulted in the death of more than 100 people. Despite these victories, the Philippine government failed to eliminate the ASG. The group remains flexible; the intensive military pressure in the Southern Philippines prompted the group to demonstrate its ability to carry out attacks and kidnappings far from its stronghold.

On 3 March 2010, three ASG members were arrested during a raid in Maharlika Village in Taguig City, Metro Manila. According to the military commander of the National Capital Region Command, the arrests foiled a series of bombing attacks in Metro Manila. Hand grenades and bomb-making materials were recovered during the raid. The three were reportedly operating under Abdul Basit Usman, a known bomb-making expert who, according to military officials, recently returned from Pakistan where he was thought to have been killed in a 14 January 2010 US drone attack near the Afghan border. The death of Albader Parad leaves the militant group with four main leaders: Khair Mundus, Isnilon Hapilon, Radullan Sahiron and Gumbahali Abu Jumdail (aka Dr Abu Pula).

The failure of the Armed Forces of

the Philippines (AFP) to eliminate the group stems from the group's loose structure in which local cell commanders enjoy considerable autonomy. While the death of the ASG leaders is likely to pose a setback for the group, it alone will not lead to the elimination of the ASG, which will continue its criminal activity and low-level bombing campaign. Further AFP operations to stop the ASG kidnapping spree is likely to result in further retaliatory attacks on civilians.

As result of the recent attack, in mid-March 2010 the newly appointed chief of staff of the AFP ordered the military to launch yet another new operation against the ASG within two months. According to the AFP spokesman, additional troops who are trained to carry out "special types of operations" would be sent to Sulu Province alongside additional resources to help hunt down the group's key leaders. Only time will tell if the operation will prove successful. **I**

Amir Lechner is a founding partner of ThreatRate Risk Management LLC, a security and crisis management consulting firm. He served in field intelligence in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) until he moved to the United States in 1991 where he served in the security department of the General Consulate of Israel in NYC and the security department of EL AL Israeli Airlines.

If you have any questions or comments about this article, please email us: comment@intersec.co.uk