

BASILAN:
The Next Afghanistan?
**Report of the International Peace Mission
to Basilan, Philippines
23–27 March 2002**

CONTACT US

Akbayan! Citizens Action Party

14 Mapagkumbaba St. Sikatuna Village
Quezon City, Philippines 1101
Tel: (+632)433-6933, 433-6831, Fax: (+632)925-2936
akbayan@pacific.net.ph
www.akbayan.org

Institute for Popular Democracy

45 Matintiman St. Teachers Village
Quezon City, Philippines 1101
Tel: (+632)434-6674, Fax: (+632)921-8049
info@ipd.ph
www.ipd.ph

Focus on the Global South - Philippines

Room 212 Burgundy Place
Katipunan Ave. cor N. Gonzales St.
Loyola Heights, Quezon City Philippines 1108
Tel: (+632)426-5610, Fax: (+632)433-0899
maryloumalig@pacific.net.ph
www.focusweb.org

Transnational Institute

Paulus Potterstraat 20
1071 DA Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Tel: (+3120) 662-6608, Fax: (+3120) 675-7176
tni@tni.org
www.tni.org



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IN FEBRUARY THIS YEAR, US military troops began arriving in the southern Philippine island-province of Basilan ostensibly for routine joint training exercises with the Philippine military. Basilan is the site of intensified military operations against the Abu Sayyaf, a kidnap-for-ransom bandit group, according to some, or an extremist Islamic movement linked to Osama bin Laden, according to the US.

US officials have been quoted as saying that the Special Forces are in Basilan to wipe out a terrorist cell connected to the Al Qaeda network. The exercises are unlike any other previously conducted: they will be held in actual combat sites and they will last for longer than six months, with an option to extend to a year. It has been the largest deployment of US troops yet since Afghanistan.

Because of these circumstances, Basilan has been called in the mainstream media as the "second front" in the US' war against terrorism. US Sam Brownback Senator called the Philippines "the next target after Afghanistan."

Fearing that what befell Afghanistan will now happen to Basilan, a group of scholars, parliamentarians, civil society leaders, and human rights activists coming from 10 countries were constituted to form a 16-member international peace mission. From March 23 to 28, the mission went around Basilan, Zamboanga City, and Cotabato City to look into allegations of human rights violations committed by the Philippine military and to assess the impact of the US' involvement on the unresolved separatist struggle in the area.

After talking to scores of local residents, government officials, and military officers, the mission reached three main conclusions:

First, there is strong evidence that the Philippine military is committing serious human rights violations against civilians. Second, there are consistent credible reports that the military and the provincial government are coddling the Abu Sayyaf. Hence, merely intensifying military action will not work to solve the problem. Finally, there is no valid justification for the US presence. It is provocative and may only ignite a bigger war.

Because of the Philippine government's adamant refusal to acknowledge the human rights violations committed by the military and its obstinate endorsement of the military solution, a more concerted and more focused international mediation is urgent and necessary.



Contents

Introduction

The Next Afghanistan?	1
The War In Mindanao	1
The Rise Of The Abu Sayyaf	2
The Coming Of The Americans	2

On Basilan

All Quiet on the 'Second Front'	3
---------------------------------------	---

The Mission's Objectives, Members, and Organizers

From Afghanistan to Basilan	5
-----------------------------------	---

The Mission's Activities

Nothing to Hide	7
Thrown Out Of Jail	7
Meeting The Governor	8
Witnesses Intimidated	8
Senior Officers A No-show	9
Corruption And Eviction	9
Off To The Mainland	9
Concealment Strategy	9
Summary Of Findings	10

On the Abu Sayyaf

Rebels, Bandits, or Terrorists?	11
---------------------------------------	----

The Mission's Findings

Portents of a Bigger War	14
1. The Philippine Military and Provincial Government are violating human rights in Basilan	14
2. The Abu Sayyaf problem may be resistant to a military solution.	17
3. The US Military's deployment in Basilan is not only unjustified but dangerous. ...	19
• The Philippine Military does not need to be trained by the United States.	20
• There are no conclusive links between the Abu Sayyaf and Bin Laden's Al Qaeda.	21
• The Philippine Military should be able to rescue the hostages without American help.	21

Conclusion and Recommendations

Promoting Peace	23
------------------------------	-----------

Endnotes	27
-----------------------	-----------

References	29
-------------------------	-----------

Acknowledgements	31
-------------------------------	-----------

BASILAN: The Next Afghanistan?



The Next Afghanistan?

BASILAN IS A SMALL ISLAND PROVINCE that has not known peace for the past thirty years.

Part of the Mindanao region, Basilan has been host to a long-playing war waged between Muslim secessionist groups and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) since the 1970s. Then, beginning in the early 1990s, Basilan became the headquarters of the Abu Sayyaf, a group that started out as an extremist Islamic movement but which eventually resorted to kidnaping and beheading tourists. In February this year, American soldiers started landing on the island for joint military exercises with the Philippine military on actual combat zones.

THE WAR IN MINDANAO

For the past few centuries, Mindanao, where Basilan is located, has carved a history and nurtured an identity that is markedly different from the rest of the country.¹ It is the only predominantly Muslim region in the Philippines, Asia's largest Christian country. While the rest of the Philippines was colonized by the Spanish for more than three hundred years, the Muslims in Mindanao consistently successfully resisted the colonizers' repeated attempts to establish sovereignty over their region.

When the Americans replaced the Spanish at the turn of the century, they began to implement policies that would later be followed and pursued more vigorously by successive Filipino regimes. They sponsored massive migration from the Christian regions in the north; huge corporate investments were poured into the region; and a non-Muslim bureaucracy was erected to administer the provinces.

As a result, the Muslims and the other indigenous communities in Mindanao were displaced and had ever since been marginalized economically and politically. At the turn of the previous century, Muslims comprised 80% of the total popula-



tion of Mindanao. Now it has reversed in favor of the settlers. Before the coming of the Americans, Mindanao had a thriving economy more robust than the rest of the colony. Now the poorest provinces in the country are to be found in the Muslim provinces in Mindanao.

In the late 60s, terror squads widely believed to be backed by Christian politicians and companies that needed more lands for their operations began harassing Muslims systematically. In 1971, vigilantes attacked a mosque and left 65 men, women, and children dead. Two years before that, 28 Muslim army trainees were massacred in a military camp, thereby inciting widespread Muslim indignation.

What followed was the launching of an organized movement that waved the flag of war for the independence of Muslim Mindanao from the rest of the Philippines.

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) took leadership of the movement and was able to gain the backing of the Organization of Islamic Countries. In 1984, a group of leaders disgruntled with the MNLF's secular orientation broke away and founded the Moro Islamic Liberation



Members of the Abu Sayyaf, jubilant and defiant

Front (MILF), a movement that espouses the creation of an Islamic state in Mindanao.

The last thirty years in Mindanao were marked by offensives and counter-offensives between the secessionist movements and the military, punctuated only by failed attempts to secure peace through negotiations. Through all that, Basilan became one of the war's battlegrounds and reliable source of fresh recruits for the rebels. Through it all, the fuel of war was not primarily religious intolerance but rather, political and economic injustice.

THE RISE OF THE ABU SAYYAF

Then, in the early 1990s, just as things were beginning to quiet down – from weariness but not from resolution – Basilan became the ground base of the Abu Sayyaf, a group that initially fought for an Islamic state but which eventually resorted to regular and high profile and high profit kidnaping for ransom. (See *Rebels, Bandits or Terrorists?* on page 11 for a background on the Abu Sayyaf.)

As a result, new battalions have been stationed in the island, new camps have opened, and more brigades have been sent in – ostensibly as part of a concerted effort to wipe out what has been dismissed by the national government as a small but savage bandit group. There are military checkpoints on the rough roads all over the island. Aside from the rebels and the bandits, there are militia groups such as the Citizens Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGUs) and the Civilian Volunteers Organizations (CVOs). Up to 12,000 of them are roaming all over the island, all armed with ArmaLites and Garands. At first glance, it is often difficult to distinguish the soldier from the militiaman, the police from the civilian, the bandit from the rebel.

And from the point of view of the soldier, it has often been difficult to distinguish the bandit from the civilian. In the intensified military operations against the Abu Sayyaf, it is often the innocent civilians who have borne the brunt of war.

THE COMING OF THE AMERICANS

For the most part, Basilan's perennial estrangement with peace has only been the intermittent concern of an insecure republic and the daily reality of its war-weary inhabitants. Before the Abu Sayyaf's well-covered kidnaping of European tourists, Basilan was virtually unknown to the rest of the world.

All these changed when, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the United States vowed to hunt and crush terrorists linked to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization wherever they may roam. In his State of the Nation address, President George W. Bush repeated the US' resolve to annihilate "breeding grounds of terrorism."² The US identified the Abu Sayyaf as among the terrorist groups with links to bin Laden and Basilan as its breed-

ing ground. Thus, even before the ultimate goal of arresting bin Laden was achieved in Afghanistan, the US had already targeted Basilan as the next battlefield of its endless war. Shortly after, American troops started landing on the island, to take part – or so the official line goes – in war games with the Philippine military.

In February this year, US Special Operations Forces have been landing in the country supposedly for war games or joint training exercises with the Philippine military. A fraction of them are stationed in Basilan – a strange case of a war game being conducted in actual combat zones. Unlike previous exercises which usually

lasted for a maximum of three months, this one will be staged from six months to a year with open options for extension. It will be the longest “military exercises” undertaken by the Philippine military.

Because the arrival of US military personnel in the country has been the largest single deployment of US troops since the war in Afghanistan, the Philippines has been touted by the international media as the “second front” in the US’ war against terrorism.² US Senator Sam Brownback who sits on the foreign relations committee was quoted as saying: “It appears the Philippines is going to be the next target after Afghanistan.”³



ALL QUIET ON THE ‘SECOND FRONT’

BASILAN, LIKE MANY OTHER PLACES in the Philippines, is a province of paradox. It is at once rich and poor and at once violent and serene. Basilan is so endowed with natural resources that no less than four colonial powers – the Spanish, the Dutch, the French, and the Americans – set their desiring eyes on it over the course of four centuries. The climate is benign, the land lush, the forests thick, and the surrounding seas teeming with marine life.

Yet, despite this, Basilan is also among a poor country’s poorest provinces, where all indicators of living standards fall below the national average. In this island, vast uninterrupted swathes of tall, swaying trees mask the violence of warfare and poverty beneath. A pervasive silence mutes the gunfire and the hunger pangs.

Basilan is located on the western part of Mindanao, one of three major island groupings in the Philippine archipelago. It is about 880 kilometers south of Manila, almost two hours by airplane from the capital and another hour by ferry from Zamboanga City on the southwestern tip of the Mindanao mainland. With a land area of 1,279 sq km or 494 sq miles, Basilan is just the size of Los Angeles City. The population as of the year 2000 was 332,828.

The Yakans, originally from Papua New Guinea, were the island’s first inhabitants followed by the Muslim Tausugs from the Sulu province, the Zamboanguenos from the Mindanao mainland, the Samal-Bajau sea gypsies, the Cebuano-speaking and mostly Christian Visayans, then the Tagalogs from faraway Luzon.

In the 14th century, sultans from neighboring Borneo invaded the island and converted the natives to Islam. In 1637, during the earliest phase of their 300-year colonization of the Philippines, the Spaniards already attempted to exploit Basilan’s resources by driving away the legendary Sultan Kudarat. The following century, the Dutch tried to possess the island but were repelled by the locals.

A century after, it was the turn of the French to be enchanted. A French admiral became enamored with Basilan, calling it his “Bosphorus,” and did everything he could to annex the island. The French Cabinet already ruled in favor of the admiral’s proposition but unfortunately for him, the King of France decided against it. When the Americans came, they set out to establish vast rubber plantations and agricultural estates. Among these was what will later become the American multinational tire giant Sime-Darby Corporation.



Basilan has a deceptive calm, punctured only by the periodic gunfire and the rumblings of the stomach.



The wonder of it is that despite Basilan's natural wealth, the province is the fourth poorest among the 77 provinces of the Philippines. Its human development index, a composite measure of its income, life expectancy, and literacy rates, is the 5th worst in the Philippines, better only compared to four other neighboring Muslim provinces.⁵ While the average literacy rate for the entire Philippines is a relatively impressive 93.5%, Basilan is one-third below that at 60%. Out of every four families in Basilan, three do not have access to health facilities and to potable water. Out of ten families, six live below the poverty threshold.⁶ Of these families, most are likely to be Muslims. In Basilan, while 71% of the population are Muslims, Christians own 75% of the land and the ethnic Chinese control 75% of the trade.⁷

The ownership of land here has continued to be a most fractious point of contention. The agrarian reform program may have wrested control of land away from the multinational corporations only to put it into the hands of the Visayan settlers instead of into the Muslims who have stayed here longer. But while the disputes between Muslims and Chris-



tians are real, usually for reasons more economic than religious, these outer more evident conflicts tend to obscure inter-tribal and inter-family feuds among Muslims themselves.

Because Basilan has been the theater of various wars and battles, Glenda Gloria and Marites Dañguilan-Vitug, journalists who have long covered the island, have referred to it as "Mindanao's best war laboratory." It is a place where "local rulers compete for legitimacy with armed rebel groups, bandits, Muslim preachers, Catholic volunteers, loggers legal and illegal, the Marines, the Army." In the 1970s, the island became one of the flashpoints of the Muslim secessionist war. In the 1990's it became the headquarters and preferred hide-out of the Abu Sayyaf group.

Basilan, as a historian described it, is "a netherworld intermittently lit by the fires of war between families, between tribes, between natives and colonialists, and between people and government."



From Afghanistan to Basilan

EVEN BEFORE BASILAN was hailed as the "second front" of the US war against terrorists, an international group of scholars, parliamentarians, and civil society leaders were already planning to send an independent team of peace, development, and human rights workers to Afghanistan. Concern about the massive human and social costs of the indiscriminate attacks had been mounting among international social movements.

After five months of bombing, it was clear that the anarchy and criminality in Afghanistan had only worsened with the coming of the Americans. Much of Al Qaeda's top command is still intact, allied forces have been killed, and civilians have become the victims of less than precise bombing. While the condition of women may have improved in certain areas to a certain extent, warlords have reemerged to divide the country into different zones, opium trade had flourished again, ethnic cleansing and the use of

rape as a weapon had also been reported. All these may have been the foreseen or unforeseen, intended or unintended, results of the US engagement in Afghanistan.

Fearing that the same fate awaits "the next target after Afghanistan" and hoping to avert such eventuality, civil society groups redrew their plans so that instead of going to a landlocked country first, they proceeded to the island of Basilan where the largest number of US troops are being deployed after Afghanistan. Preparations are currently underway for the eventual visit of another peace mission to Afghanistan.

After a flurry of e-mail exchanges, 15 men and women from 10 different countries confirmed their participation as members of the international peace mission. Among them were parliamentarians or legislative staffers, scholars, journalists, and civil society leaders.

Matti Wuori from Finland is the former chairman of Greenpeace International, and



The mission members, on a cloudy day, at the zamboanga City pier before boarding the ferry to Basilan

currently sits as a Member of the European Parliament. Lee Rhiannon is an elected member of the New South Wales Legislative Council in Australia while Pierre Rousset, from France, is a member of the secretariat of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left parliamentary group in the European Parliament.

Among those from the universities are Aijaz Ahmad, a professor at India's Jawaharlal Nehru University and an eminent Indian Muslim author who has published extensively on Islam and politics; Walden Bello from the University of the Philippines, a famous authority on inter-

Fearing that the same fate awaits "the next target after Afghanistan" and hoping to avert such eventuality, civil society groups redrew their plans so that instead of going to a landlocked country first, they proceeded to the island of Basilan where the largest number of US troops are being deployed after Afghanistan.



The mission members conferring with a local resident of Basilan

What bound them together was a common conviction, reinforced by years of actual involvement in closely analyzing conflicts around the world, that military solutions do not work and that they only aggravate the problem.

national political economy; Earl Martin, a scholar on East Asia who has lived in the Philippines and who was in Vietnam during the war; Bill Rolston, a professor of sociology at the University of Ulster in Belfast and a respected analyst of the Northern Ireland conflict; and Roland Simbulan, also of the University of the Philippines, an expert on US-Philippine military relations who became a leading figure in the campaign against the US bases in the country.

Coming from civil society organizations were Australian Nicola Bullard, deputy director of Focus on the Global South and Italian Marco Mezzera, also from Focus and currently embarking on a research on Islamic revivalism in Southeast Asia. Ronald Llamas is currently the secretary for international affairs of Akbayan party-list organization. Seiko Ohashi has lived in the Philippines for the last 8 years as international coordinator of the Asian Rural Alternatives. Corazon Fabros is the secretary-general of Nuclear Free Philippines Coalition while Amy Catacutan represented Gathering for Peace, an alliance of groups opposing the joint Philippine-US military exercises.

Victoria Brittain is a former associate foreign editor of the influential British newspaper *The Guardian* and author of several books on Southern Africa and the effects of Western policy during the Cold War. As part of her research on the impact of conflict on women, Brittain has traveled around the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Cambodia, East Timor, Rwanda,

etc. Like her, other members of the team have taken part in similar missions to such places as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Estonia, South Africa, Russia, and other conflict areas.

Together, members of the mission brought with them different perspectives and experiences that would prove to be helpful not only in making sense of the complexities of Basilan but in disentangling them as well. What bound them together was a common conviction, reinforced by years of actual involvement in closely analyzing conflicts around the world, that military so-

lutions do not work and that they only aggravate the problem. They went to Basilan with a shared faith in dialogue as the most effective means for laying the conditions that harbor peace.

The mission had four broad objectives. First was to look into officially denied reports of civilian casualties, arbitrary arrests, and displacements of affected communities. Second was to evaluate the conduct of the joint US and Philippine military exercises as well as its possible ramifications on the Moro separatist struggle. Third was to share with local civil society organizations information on security trends as well as insights on similar conflicts in other parts of the world. Fourth was to gather and disseminate views that may guide possible international initiatives towards peaceful resolution of Basilan's problems.

The mission was jointly organized by Focus on the Global South, the Institute for Popular Democracy, and Akbayan Citizens' Action Party – three organizations that are very active in the Philippine civil society scene – together with the Netherlands-based Transnational Institute (TNI).

Focus on the Global South is a Bangkok-based research and advocacy NGO committed to regional and global policy research, micro-macro issue linking and advocacy work. It produces and propagates critical analyses of regional and global socio-economic trends while espousing democratic and poverty-reducing alternatives for marginalized countries.

The Institute for Popular Democracy is a research organization that has conducted path-breaking studies on Philippine elites, elections, local politics, and democratization, aside from undertaking macro-economic analysis and local development research.

Akbayan is a multi-sectoral party-list organization with members from different religions and regions across the Philippines. Pressing on with a platform of institutional,

political, and economic reform, Akbayan seeks to expand democratic and program-based politics.

A worldwide fellowship of committed scholar-activists, TNI is a research institute not aligned with any political party. Animated by the spirit of public scholarship, TNI promotes international cooperation in looking for solutions to such problems as militarism, poverty, and environmental degradation.



Nothing to Hide

LOCAL RESIDENTS OF ISABELA CITY in Basilan said it was the first time it rained in months when the mission members disembarked on the remote island province in the afternoon of March 23.

By this time, the mission had stirred national interest after the country's most widely read newspaper and most influential agenda-setter bannered their visit to Basilan. National Security Adviser Roilo Golez denied any human rights violations were being committed in Basilan and President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo would later be quoted as saying that such accusations were "an insult to the Filipino soldier." The main propaganda line used by those critical of the mission was a variant of the President's: to criticize the military and the US troops is to be an "Abu Sayyaf lover." Instead of looking into the victims of the military, so the line went, the mission should instead commiserate with the victims of the bandit group.

To this, the mission repeatedly emphasized that it is

as appalled by the atrocities committed by the Abu Sayyaf and as concerned about its victims. However, an international peace mission does not have to be formed to go to Mindanao to verify the Abu Sayyaf's atrocities since these are very well publicized already. In contrast, human rights violations are not only denied, the victims have also been abandoned by the government.

THROWN OUT OF JAIL

Right after their arrival, the mission proceeded to the provincial jail where a

...the mission had stirred national interest after the country's most widely read newspaper and most influential agenda-setter bannered their visit to Basilan.



Matt Wuori pressing a point during a press conference in Zamboanga City.

Despite the prohibition, some mission members found a way to talk with some of the detainees while the warden's attention was being distracted by mission members negotiating for entry. What they found out, even if they had been adequately warned, was appalling.

number of suspected Abu Sayyaf members or sympathizers reportedly arrested without warrant were being detained. Curiously, despite previously finalized arrangements, jail officials informed the mission members, together with legislators who were there as part of a congressional inquiry, that they were banned from entering the prison.

The jail warden said the order came from Basilan Governor Wahab Akbar. A logbook entry recorded an instruction coming from the office of the governor not to admit the peace mission to the prison. This was highly suspicious and irregular since reporters had previously always found it easy to get access to the jail. Moreover, the legislators who went with the mission protested that the governor's restriction constituted a violation of the separation of powers between the executive and the legislative branches of government.

Despite the prohibition, some mission members found a way to talk with some of the detainees while the warden's attention was being distracted by mission members negotiating for entry. What they found out, even if they had been adequately warned, was appalling. Detained at the prison were civilians arrested without warrants, including children and a pregnant woman. (See page 14 for more details.)

MEETING THE GOVERNOR

That same evening, the mission members held a dialogue with the provincial Governor Akbar, who, contrary to the warden's statement, denied issuing the order preventing the mission from entering the prison. The mission members confronted the Governor about the condition of the detainees, citing in particular the case of the pregnant woman.

To all these, the governor simply said he couldn't care less about the pregnant woman's plight. More surprisingly, he admitted that there are indeed innocent civilians detained at the jail.

WITNESSES INTIMIDATED

The morning after, hastily prepared placards expressing support for the joint

war exercises had been posted all over the city, reportedly by men identified with the governor. After a dialogue with Isabela City Mayor Luis Biel II, the mission were ushered by hostile pro-US presence rallyists into a public hearing organized by the House of Representatives' Committee on Human, Civil, and Political Rights. As many as 31 human rights victims were expected to publicly narrate their experiences but they were not able to speak.

The director of the local NGO taking care of the victims said the witnesses were afraid that the military would get



There are now up to 6000 soldiers pursuing the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan.

back at them later. Other witnesses were prevented from going to the hearing because of ongoing military operations in their areas. A number of others failed to turn up because local officials told them that the venue had been changed. A suspicious power outage occurred around thirty minutes into the hearing and electricity was restored only after the hearing was suspended. Urging the committee to look into their cases instead, alleged victims of the Abu Sayyaf insisted on speaking, crowding out the witness whose narrations the congressmen sought out to hear in the first place.

Thankfully, the committee managed to convince some of the witnesses to speak to them in a closed-door executive session with the congresspeople at first, then with the mission members after. (See page 14.) Before this, the mission members went to the village of Tabuk, birthplace of Abu Sayyaf's founder Abdurajak Janjalani, and the community where scores of civilians had been arrested on suspicion of links with the Abu Sayyaf last year. Here, the mission members had free, off-the-cuff, face-to-face interactions with the

residents of the predominantly Muslim neighborhood.

SENIOR OFFICERS A NO-SHOW

The mission secured an appointment for a dialogue with Lt. Col. David Maxwell, head of the US Special Forces in Basilan, and Armed Forces of the Philippines Basilan area commander Major-General Glicerio Sua. An hour after the appointed time, it became obvious that the officers were nowhere to be found. It appeared as though the presence of the mission, despite the pre-agreed appointment, was unexpected.

The spokesperson of the military said the commanders had proceeded to meet the mission in the city even when it was previously made clear that the dialogue was to be held in the camp. Probably after some prodding among themselves, lower-ranking officers were finally made to face the guests. As expected, they refused to answer the more critical questions fielded by the mission members.

During the dialogue, Major Salvador Calanoy admitted that the military does not have any evidence of links between the military and the Abu Sayyaf. He also disclosed that there are now seven battalions stationed in Basilan. Junior American officers praised their Filipino counterparts as "excellent soldiers" but refused to answer the more crucial questions. (See page 20.)

CORRUPTION AND EVICTION

That same afternoon, the team proceeded to the town of Lamitan where the Abu Sayyaf suspiciously slipped through military cordon in June last year. The mission listened to testimonies of local residents accusing the military of being in cahoots with the Abu Sayyaf. Witnesses and former kidnap victims lined up to recount the day the military allegedly allowed the Abu Sayyaf to walk away.

In Zamboanga City on the fourth day, the mission hiked through parts of the jungle where the US and Philippine forces are set to play their war games, then listened to the families who will be dislocated as a result. Indigenous people living in the area were furious at the government for leasing their ancestral lands to the military without even consulting them. Their livelihood and their way of life will be se-

riously affected once the war games begin. (See page 19.)

OFF TO THE MAINLAND

Even as the war against the Abu Sayyaf rages on in Basilan, the secessionist struggle launched thirty years ago for the creation of an independent Muslim nation in Southern Philippines simmers on in the Mindanao mainland.

Two members of the international peace mission, Aijaz Ahmad and Marco Mezzera, proceeded to Cotabato City from March 26 to 28 to look into the possible impact of the joint US-RP military exercises on the still unresolved conflict there. Ahmad and Mezzera are two scholars who have both previously traveled around Cotabato to closely study the emergence and dynamics of the MNLF and, subsequently, the MILF.

In Cotabato City, the two members of the peace mission talked with key leaders of the MNLF and the MILF and government officials from the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). A leading official of the MILF voiced his apprehensions about the presence of US troops in the island. The MILF, he said, is afraid that after the Abu Sayyaf, they will be the next target of the US' war against terrorism.

CONCEALMENT STRATEGY

Throughout the course of the mission, the Philippine government seemed intent on giving the impression that something needs concealing. "We have nothing to hide," Presidential spokesperson Rigoberto Tiglao confidently told the mission and assured them of full cooperation from the government. He even offered to accompany the mission members to Basilan even as he subtly attempted to scare them with an admonition not to proceed because of the high possibility of being abducted.⁹

At the outset, Tiglao said the government would ensure that the gates of the provincial prison and the military training camps would be open to the mission. However, as the investigation progressed, not only was the mission denied entry to the jail, they were also not properly welcomed by the people they wanted to see at the military camp.

The mission listened to testimonies of local residents accusing the military of being in cahoots with the Abu Sayyaf. Witnesses and former kidnap victims lined up to recount the day the military allegedly allowed the Abu Sayyaf to walk away.

Throughout the course of the mission, the Philippine government seemed intent on giving the impression that something needs concealing.

It was later revealed that the lack of cooperation from local military and government officials, so far removed from that promised by the President, was deliberate. In defending her subordinates' refusal to accommodate the mission,¹⁰ President Arroyo eventually betrayed the insincerity of her government's earlier offer. It also cast in doubt the government's assurances of having "nothing to hide."

Moreover, while the mission was busy traveling around Basilan, the highest-ranking security official of the government, National Security Adviser Roilo Golez was also busy attacking the credibility of the mission members and conditioning the public into believing that the findings of the mission would be invalid because preconceived by the supposed biases of its organizers.¹¹

Golez described the mission members as "people of doubtful credentials" and "imported military bashers."¹² Decrying the mission as a "shameful act of foreign intervention in our internal affairs," Golez urged the immigration bureau to bar all entering foreigners whose only goal for visiting the country is to "find fault and destroy the image of the country."¹³ The director of the joint training exercises with the US, Brig. Gen. Emmanuel Teodosio, even wanted to have the mission members officially investigated.¹⁴

All the while and even before the mission could release its findings, the national government and the military repeatedly said that no human rights violations have been or are being committed in Basilan. But as evidenced by its insincere

offer to cooperate and its unrelenting attacks on the mission, this was not something that the government wanted the mission members to see for themselves.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In Basilan, security troops who escorted the mission members claimed to have intercepted reports that the governor's men were actually planning to abduct three of the mission members. The members of the mission had come at considerable risk to their lives, choosing to go around an island where an estimated 500 people, a number of whom were foreigners, had already been held as Abu Sayyaf hostages.

After traveling around and interviewing scores of local residents, the mission arrived at three main conclusions:

- First, despite the national government's denial of any wrongdoing, there is strong evidence that the military is committing human rights abuses in Basilan.
- Second, a complex political phenomenon manifested by the Abu Sayyaf problem may be resistant to the military solution endorsed by the government.
- Finally, the US' avowed reasons for deploying troops in Basilan – to train the Philippine military and/or to exterminate the Abu Sayyaf – do not hold water.



REBELS, BANDITS, OR TERRORISTS?

ON EASTER SUNDAY, 2000, the name "Abu Sayyaf" forced its way into international consciousness with the kidnapping of 21 mostly European tourists and local workers in a diving resort in Sipadan Island, Malaysia. While the group had been abducting mostly foreign Catholic priests, tourists, journalists, and even local residents of Basilan for the past nine years, this was the first time that the Abu Sayyaf gained high-profile worldwide notoriety. French and German journalists trooped to the island and sent daily dispatches back home, eventually becoming news items too when they themselves were kidnapped. Not even the battle of Jolo at the height of the Muslim war in Mindanao in 1974 was able to gain as much international attention.



Million-dollar ransoms has allowed the Abu Sayyaf to purchase high-powered guns.

In May last year, just a month after the last of its Sipadan hostages were freed, the Abu Sayyaf once again swooped down into another resort, this time in the Philippine island of Palawan, to kidnap another batch of hostages that included three Americans.

Depending on who you ask, the Abu Sayyaf is either just a group of greedy bandits, an extremist rebel movement fighting for an Islamic state, another creation of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Philippine military, or a faraway terrorist cell of Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization.

After the Abu Sayyaf kidnapped another group of tourists in Palawan island following the release of the last Sipadan hostages, an exasperated President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo dismissed them as just "a money-crazed gang of criminals." Since then, she has

staunchly refused to recognize them as "rebels" and has taken the habit of calling them "bandits" whenever she has to refer to them. But for a

Depending on who you ask, the Abu Sayyaf is either just a group of greedy bandits, an extremist rebel movement fighting for an Islamic state, another creation of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Philippine military, or a faraway terrorist cell of Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization.

time, members of the Philippine military speak of the Abu Sayyaf as the "dirty tricks department" of the secessionist group Moro National Liberation Front, supposedly committing officially disowned criminal acts which they know would besmirch the reputation of their group but which are necessary for fund-raising purposes.¹⁵

The Moro National Liberation Front denies this and for its part claims that the Abu Sayyaf is a creation of the military to destroy the image of the secessionist movement and to sabotage peace negotiations with the government.¹⁶ Because the group was founded by an Afghan war veteran who was among those supposedly trained by the US to fight the Russians invading Afghanistan, the Abu Sayyaf had also been tagged by some quarters as yet another creation of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Ironically, the United States, following its war against the Taliban, has cast the Abu Sayyaf

It is difficult to pin down the Abu Sayyaf because, to varying extents, each of the labels that have been attached to it are arguably partly, and for different time periods, appropriate.

with its vaunted terrorist pedigree, with a kind of anxious reverence. After all, the legitimacy of the Philippine armed forces' joint war games with the American military rests on the Abu Sayyaf being more than a "money crazed gang of criminals."

It is difficult to pin down the Abu Sayyaf because, to varying extents, each of the labels that have been attached to it are argu-



Soldiers patrol the seas which have always allowed the Abu Sayyaf to escape freely.

ably partly, and for different time periods, appropriate.

For example, the Abu Sayyaf can be characterized – at least from the time it was

as the local branch of the worldwide terrorist group responsible for the September 11 attacks. Curiously, after the US insinuated that it is in the Philippines for joint war games in an effort to wipe out all Al Qaeda cells worldwide, the Philippine government has stopped referring to the Abu Sayyaf as just another bandit group. From an attitude of dismissive contempt, the Philippine government – thanks to the importance the US has conferred on the group – now holds the Abu Sayyaf, what

founded to the time when its kidnapping activities intensified – as an extremist or fundamentalist Islamic rebel group agitating for the creation of an independent and "pure" Islamic state in the southern Philippines. The Abu Sayyaf was established by a group of former members of the MNLF disenchanted with the leadership and vision of then MNLF chair Nur Misuari. Ustadz Abdurajak Janjalani, the Abu Sayyaf founder who was killed in 1998, had been with the MNLF since he was young.¹⁷

Aspiring for absolute independence for Mindanao, Janjalani was a fierce critic of Misuari's decision to accede to peace negotiations with the government. To defuse his criticism, the MILF sent him to study in Libya where,

instead of calming down, he continued attacking Misuari's leadership among the Filipinos there and persuaded them to found another group with him. Back in Mindanao, Janjalani began recruiting men from the ranks of the MNLF, convincing them that Misuari was not waging the true *jihad*.¹⁸ He presented the Abu Sayyaf as the alternative to the mainstream armed movements in Mindanao, with its own extremist platforms and beliefs, in an effort to distance itself from the MNLF and the MILF. In a sense, then, it would be correct to say that the Abu Sayyaf was a splinter group of the MNLF in that it was disaffection with the latter that gave birth to the former. Also with this reading, it can be said that it was Janjalani's ideological differences with the MNLF that defined the Abu Sayyaf.

There are those, however, who would downplay the Abu Sayyaf's ideological component claiming that this was only used to secure funding from Middle East patrons or that this has since completely melted away with the group's foray to kidnapping. The MNLF and the MILF has, for the most part, been relying upon countries like Libya and Egypt to assure its existence and the Abu



Basilan's youth have always been fertile grounds for recruitment.

Sayyaf supposedly needed more credible justification for its actions if it also wanted to partake of this bounty.¹⁹

Scholars and journalists have noted that, in contrast to the MILF and the MNLF, the Abu Sayyaf has not exerted sustained efforts to articulate and construct a coherent political program. It has also failed to establish a mass base for the future constituency of their aspired Islamic state. Thus, for Eric Gutierrez of the Institute for Popular Democracy, an independent research institute, the Abu Sayyaf are merely "entrepreneurs dealing in profit-motivated violence with ideological and political posturings, "not a political movement with a serious political agenda."²⁰

But more than the avowed ends, it is the means that has distinguished the Abu Sayyaf from the other armed Muslim rebel groups. They first made their presence felt in 1991 with a grenade attack on a floating bookstore of Christian evangelists docked in Zamboanga City. They then bombed the Zamboanga airport and a number of Catholic Churches. In 1995, they were implicated in a plan to assassinate Pope John Paul II in Manila. Later that year, they led in razing the town center of Ipil in Zamboanga to the ground, indiscriminately killing 53 soldiers, policemen and civilians in the process.

Since then, they have diversified into the more lucrative kidnap-for-ransom business. Some people believe that the group started getting involved in kidnapping only upon the goading of a certain Edwin Angeles, said to be a military agent who managed to befriend Janjalani and become one of the groups' stalwarts. It is estimated that they have kidnapped at least 500 people since 1992, most of them Filipinos – Christians and Muslims alike, while a number of them were foreign tourists, priests, or journalists. In all, they are believed to have beheaded 47 people.

Muslim religious leaders have condemned the Abu Sayyaf's atrocities as barbaric and un-Islamic. Contrary to the Abu Sayyaf's

claim of waging *jihad*, these religious leaders said the Abu Sayyaf's methods desecrate the requirements set forth by the principles of a holy war. Father Charles Bertelsmann, a foreign priest who was among the first kidnap victims of the Abu Sayyaf, also does not believe that his former abductors are embroiled in a Christian-Muslim conflict. For him, the Abu Sayyaf is just a small group of radicals.²¹

...after almost a year of hot pursuit, 5,000 soldiers, 12,000 paramilitary men, and now 160 US Special Forces have not been able to capture these remaining 60 bandits/ rebels/terrorists.

Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization comes into the picture in two ways. First, Janjalani supposedly personally met bin Laden in Afghanistan where both saw action during the Afghan war against the Soviet Union. Second, one of Janjalani's associates supposedly came into contact with bin Laden's brother-in-law who then supposedly funded the Abu Sayyaf through a relief NGO.²² There are even people claiming to have seen bin Laden himself visit the Abu

Sayyaf camp although no hard evidence on this has been presented. The national government had previously scoffed at claims linking the Abu Sayyaf to the Al Qaeda but had appeared to have changed its mind after the Americans indicated belief on the said connection.

From just 30 during its early days, the Abu Sayyaf's membership peaked at around 3,000 in the late 90s. They have since dwindled down to just around 60, says the military following their offensives after the Palawan kidnapping. And yet, after almost a year of hot pursuit, 5,000 soldiers, 12,000 paramilitary men, and now 160 US Special Forces have not been able to capture these remaining 60 bandits/ rebels/terrorists.



Gracia and Martin Burnham, two remaining hostages of the Abu Sayyaf



Portents of a Bigger War

Throughout the mission, the members personally visited the provincial jail, interviewed widows, talked with the common people on the streets, and trekked through what will soon be a jungle training camp.

I. The Philippine military and provincial government are violating human rights in Basilan.

PACKED INSIDE THE DINGY QUARTERS of the Basilan Provincial Jail is one strong collective proof that the military is committing human rights violations in Basilan: Of its 113 detainees, all squeezed within five small cells, 62 claimed they were arrested without warrants. Among the prisoners were children, a pregnant woman, and an old man above 65 years old.

The members of the mission, together with Congresspeople from the House of Representatives' committee on human rights, went to the provincial jail around 2 PM of March 23 but were denied entry upon orders of the governor. The governor denied this but the mission members were able to read a logbook entry noting the governor's specific instruction not to allow the visitors in.

Despite this, the truth about the condition of the prisoners still forced its way out. While some of the mission members were negotiating with the warden, the others managed to talk with detainees who were only too willing to let the outside world know about what happened to them.

The detainees told the mission members how many among them were arbitrarily arrested by the military during saturation drives conducted in their neighborhoods last year. Most of those detained have been held there on suspicion of being Abu Sayyaf members for up to seven months already without any charges being filed yet. Some had been transferred to Zamboanga City or Manila. At one point, when asked whether they were forced to admit their membership in the Abu Sayyaf, detainees

in one cell spontaneously replied, "Kuryentel," meaning electric shock. Apparently, and this was to be later confirmed by other reports, the military had taken to torturing civilians to extract confessions.

Prisoners of the Basilan provincial jail, however, may still be considered lucky compared to other locals. At 4 PM on March 24, the mission members were able to talk to two women who claimed that their husbands were summarily executed by the military. These widows, who shall be hidden under the names Menega and Hasnina, were supposed to be among the dozens of witnesses who were to testify at a Congressional public hearing on victims of human rights but who backed out for fear of reprisal, choosing instead to tell their stories to the mission members in private.

Two years ago in Tipo-tipo, a town 50 kilometers from Isabela City, Menega was walking with her husband and their children to gather nuts. Menega's husband was atop a carabao when soldiers suddenly arrived and started to fire at him in front of her wife and children. He was not warned. He was not armed. Menega has no reason to believe he was a member of the Abu Sayyaf. Two years after, Menega still does not know what happened to her husband.

Also in Tipo-tipo just this March 17, Hasnina's husband was walking towards a nearby well to perform ablution in preparation for his morning prayer. It was still dark since it was only about 4 AM in the morning. Hasnina was inside the house so she did not even hear the gunfire. On the way home from the well, Hasnina's husband met soldiers and, after a brief scuffle, was arrested and driven away. Hasnina knows they were soldiers because they were not speaking the local dialect. Because their house was the only one targeted by the soldiers in their community, Hasnina and her family immediately fled. Later in the day, Hasnina's brother-in-law went back to bury her husband.

On their own, the mission members came across and talked with locals who had their own share of stories to tell but did not want to be quoted. One recurring story had been depicted in that famous scene in the movie "The Battle of Algiers" – of men in hoods going around pointing fingers at people who will later be picked up by the military, tortured, then locked up in jail. Locals would speak about being arrested after praying at the mosque and being forced to admit their membership to the Abu Sayyaf. They would tell stories of relatives and friends being apprehended and sent to jails in Zamboanga City or Manila – all familiar stories of civilians caught in the crossfire of a war not of their own making.

According to Tom del Monte of the Moro Human Rights Center, an organization devoted to documenting human rights abuses and helping victims, whenever innocent civilians are killed, the military would always pass them off as members of Abu Sayyaf. After all, dead as they are, these victims would not be able to claim innocence and assert their human rights.

It is also customary, del Monte says, for the military to base their arrests on information provided by finger-pointing hooded informers. In most cases, the military only allows itself to be used – wittingly or unwittingly – for personal vendetta by warring powers in the province. Instead of taking their revenge personally, these elements would simply inform the military that their personal enemy has links to the Abu Sayyaf and these enemies would eventually be arrested without proper charges.

In nearby Barangay Limpapa, Zamboanga City, the human rights violations may be of a different strain. It does not involve the warrantless arrests of the local residents but of their land. In the morning of March 26, the mission members hiked through parts of a mountain on a land claimed by the Subanens, a local indigenous people, as their ancestral domain, a place which they have occupied-chieftain Navo Lambo keeps emphatically repeating – since "time immemorial."

But if the Philippine Armed Forces and the United States military would have its way, 50 hectares of this land would be the site of their jungle warfare exercises for the next six months or more. Refusing to recognize their ancestral claim, the

Zamboanga City Special Economic Zone (ZCSPEC) authority had taken authority over the place years ago and unilaterally leased the lands to the AFP for the joint military exercises this year. Community leaders were so frustrated that the ZCSPEC did not even bother to consult them about the lease. Their right to free and prior consent was ignored.

According to Lambo, seventeen families will be forced to evacuate their homes and livelihood. Numerous other families will also be indirectly affected. The exercises will also impact negatively on the indigenous people's culture since their traditional burial grounds and prayer areas will be occupied by the troops.

Throughout the mission, the members personally visited the provincial jail, interviewed widows, talked with the common people on the streets, and trekked through what will soon be a jungle training camp. And yet, for the top brass of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and for the President of the Philippines, the jail, the widows, and the jungle do not exist. The military leadership and the national government have time and again denied that the rights of civilians and suspects are being trampled upon in Basilan. Hence, in the minds of those in power, there is no need to investigate any such allegations, to penalize those committing the infraction, and to compensate the victims because, in the first place, human rights are being fully respected in Basilan.

But it is not as though the mission's plea to look into the allegations is a solitary voice in the wilderness. No less than the government's constitutionally mandated human rights watchdog, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), has issued strongly worded reports condemning the "blatant human rights violations" by the Armed Forces and recommending the filing of criminal cases against those responsible. In the course of its investigation – following established procedures more thorough and more systematic than the peace mission's, the CHR gathered strong evidence confirming reports of warrantless arrests, denial of visitation rights, cases of torture, and even involuntary disappearances.²⁵

Collecting the victims' affidavits as well as pictures showing signs of cigarette burns and wounds, the CHR closely probed the raids conducted by the 103rd Army Brigade

at dawn on July 13, 2001 in Barangay Tabuk. According to the report, while the residents were still sleeping, masked military operatives swooped into the village to conduct a saturation drive, demanding that the residents emerge from their houses. Narrating further:

"Male residents were herded in one place and informants with faces also covered, pointed their fingers to suspected ASG members and sympathizers. The ones pointed out were immediately arrested, hogtied and blindfolded, while their houses were subjected to extensive searches. Neither they nor their relatives were shown any arrest or search warrant despite their insistent demand." Some of these residents, their relatives and friends corroborated the CHR's reports when the mission members themselves went to Barangay Tabuk.

Another group, the Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights (KARAPATAN) also went to Basilan to conduct a separate independent fact-finding mission on the July 13 incident. Their findings echoed those of the CHR's. Backed with more than a hundred affidavits and other supporting documents, KARAPATAN documented cases of forced evacuation of entire communities, aerial bombardment and mortar shelling of neighborhoods, brutal killings, arbitrary arrests and detention, and widespread looting and destruction of property.

"By themselves, the documented violations were already alarming in their gravity," noted the report. "But they become even more disturbing if viewed in the context of violations occurring within such a short period in such a small province but in such a big number

Just two weeks after the peace mission and the House of Representatives' public hearing, the Senate, or the upper house of the Philippine legislature, also sent three Senators to look into the human rights situation in the province. What they found were more of the same. More stories of torture, arbitrary arrests and involuntary disappearances came out in the open.²¹

During the hearing, an old Muslim woman emotionally testified how she found her son dead three days after he was arrested last September by the Marines on suspicion of being part of the Abu Sayyaf. "I found where my son was buried. Half of his body was buried in the ground. His sex organ was cut off, his

tongue was cut off, his bones were broken, all of his bones were broken," narrated Anissa Angulo.²⁵

Still, even the many cases that have been uncovered so far may just be the tip of the iceberg. After all, fact-finding missions can only interview so many people. The peace mission was not even able to visit the more far-flung municipalities where violations are reportedly more rampant. More importantly, for every human rights victim who dares to speak out are numerous others who have been muted and paralyzed by fear and the desire to live.

In the face of all these reports – the CHR's, KARAPATAN's and now this mission's, the national government has adamantly maintained that there are no human rights abuses in Basilan. (Interestingly, while the national security officials have stood firm in their blanket denial of abuses, military officers actually stationed in Basilan merely chose neither to confirm nor deny the accusations.) With the government having turned its backs on the victims by officially dismissing their complaints, the human rights victims have nowhere to go. Critics have repeatedly urged the peace mission to look instead at the victims of the Abu Sayyaf. But taken in a larger context, the plight of the Abu Sayyaf's victims has been universally acknowledged. Moreover, they have the entire judicial system to process their demand for justice; they have the military to pursue those who have wronged them.

Compare this with the situation confronting human rights victims.

Are the allegations of human rights conclusive? Are the pieces of evidence strong enough? How do we know that the witnesses were not deliberately misleading the mission? There are no assurances. But to dismiss the allegations outright would not only be, in the face of the mounting evidence, seriously unwarranted but also irresponsible. The government's own doubts should be its primary reason to conduct a deeper probe. After all, more than any other party, it is the government who will be in the best position to effectively address the results of its own investigation.

For starters, perhaps it will help if the national government stops seeing these allegations of abuses as "an insult to the Filipino soldier" but as a helpful

strategy for ultimately solving the Abu Sayyaf problem. The Abu Sayyaf's membership, a former insider said, was bloated by victims of military abuses and relatives of ordinary civilians who were killed by soldiers. For every household harassed by the military, an entire neighborhood would offer to protect the Abu Sayyaf, hide their arms, and provide them food. For every man wrongly persecuted by the military, three other brothers or cousins would join the Abu Sayyaf to have his death avenged.

In the end, human rights violations committed in an effort to defeat the enemy, will paradoxically increase, not reduce, the membership of the Abu Sayyaf. With their abuses, the military may actually be turning out to be the Abu Sayyaf's most active recruiters.

2. THE ABU SAYYAF PROBLEM MAY BE RESISTANT TO A MILITARY SOLUTION.

FR. CIRILO NACORDA, parish priest of the town of Lamitan in Basilan, was taken hostage by the Abu Sayyaf for three months in 1994. While in the kidnapers' custody, Fr. Nacorda spotted boxes of armory and ammunition in their hideout. On their faces were printed: Department of Defense - Armed Forces of the Philippines. Several times he also overheard Abu Sayyaf leaders discussing the possible help a government official could give them in getting more weapons. While trekking through the mountains of Basilan with the Abu Sayyaf, Fr. Nacorda would often see military troops just ignoring them as if they were invisible.

How can the Philippine military solve the Abu Sayyaf when it itself may be part of the problem? Throughout the mission's stay, the members encountered and listened to witnesses who reinforced allegations that the Philippine military is in cahoots with the group that they are supposed to be pursuing. In the afternoon of March 25, the team took a dangerous one-hour trip to the town of Lamitan to listen to Fr. Nacorda and his parishioners recount the event that has completely shattered their faith in the military. Their stories had been carefully chronicled by the government-body Commission on Human Rights and had also been the subject of a congressional inquiry.²⁶

It was June 1, 2002: five days after the Abu Sayyaf abducted 20 hostages in the island of Palawan and an indignant President had ordered an all-out offensive against them. Despite the full red alert and the heavy military presence in the island, the Abu Sayyaf were able to sneak past a number of checkpoints and elude patrolling troops while traveling along a heavily-guarded national highway.

In Lamitan, they took refuge in a hospital, just across from Fr. Nacorda's church. By daytime, an estimated 3,000 government soldiers had surrounded the town. Helicopters were hovering above, firing rockets at the complex. All possible exits were covered. There was no way the kidnapers could escape. It was to be the end of a kidnapping group that had become the scourge of Basilan and the Philippines for the last ten years.

Then, the Abu Sayyaf just walked away.

It turned out that soldiers guarding the back of the hospital were suddenly ordered by their superiors to abandon their posts, leaving the only possible exit unguarded. Only the armed civilians and the police refused to leave, engaging the escaping kidnapers in a firefight while wondering where the soldiers had gone.

A few hours before the Abu Sayyaf's escape, Brig. Gen Romeo Dominguez allegedly met with the family of one of the hostages in a hotel in Zamboanga City. Several hours after the meeting, the general arrived at Lamitan carrying a black briefcase containing bundles of P1,000 peso bills. Asked by a nurse as to when the fighting will end, the general smiled and said, "It will end soon." He handed the nurses P1,000 bills and added, "This afternoon." The general left still carrying the attache case. When he went back to the hospital, the attache case was no longer with him; two of the hostages were.²⁷

Witnesses inside the hospital claimed to have heard conversations among the Abu Sayyaf members signifying that ransom had been paid for two of the hostages.²⁸ Other witnesses narrated how they tried to warn the soldiers about the kidnapers' escape but were just ignored.²⁹ The other soldiers continued firing at the hospital until 5 AM of June 3 even when the Abu Sayyaf had already left by 5 PM the previous day. Abu Sayyaf spokesperson Abu Sabaya was ear-

For every household harassed by the military, an entire neighborhood would offer to protect the Abu Sayyaf, hide their arms, and provide them food. For every man wrongly persecuted by the military, three other brothers or cousins would join the Abu Sayyaf to have his death avenged.

When the Abu Sayyaf and their hostages were trekking through the mountains to transfer hideouts, the soldiers manning the posts at military detachments would often play deaf or blind. Others would even deliberately let the group pass.

lier overheard during a phone call saying, "I thought you said it was all clear. Why are you still shooting?"

A captain in the military alleged that everything in the Lamitan siege was scripted.³⁰ As early as two days before the incident, he was already instructed to handle a hostage-crisis in Lamitan, hinting that his superiors knew what was going to happen beforehand. When they reached Lamitan, most of them were not issued firearms. Upon reaching the scene of the fight, they were left defenseless and three of his men were killed.

Another member of the military reported seeing Basilan Governor Wahab Akbar meeting with a known Abu Sayyaf leader. He also saw members of the Abu Sayyaf using a dump truck belonging to the provincial government in going to Lamitan. Later on, he intercepted through his scanner what he believed to be a conversation between the Governor and the Abu Sayyaf commander. The former was asking the latter whether they are all safe and whether they have already escaped.³¹ Other witnesses also saw the Governor entering the hospital and conferring with an Abu Sayyaf leader inside.

What happened in Lamitan in June last year, based on the collated testimonies of witnesses who have no motive to lie and who are only endangering their own lives by speaking, is credible: Ranking leaders of the military and the local government facilitated the payment of ransom to the Abu Sayyaf in exchange for the freedom of some of the hostages. A general received a briefcase full of cash from the family of a hostage, gave it to the Abu Sayyaf, then ordered his troops to let the kidnap group escape. A provincial governor lent the resources of the province to the bandit group, ensured that they received the ransom, and guaranteed that they had escaped.

This account is very disturbing, and the more both the national and provincial government react defensively and refuse to thoroughly investigate it, the more credible it will become.

Why do the national government and the military seem so helpless against a small bandit group? The answer seems to be in Lamitan. But instead of looking deeper, the government has rushed to the side of the military and cleared all those

involved as if nothing happened. Akbar himself confided that there is an ongoing campaign to discredit Nacorda and to undermine his credibility by labeling him as the "crazy priest." General Dominguez has called Nacorda's accusations the "product of a sick mind."³² His recent arrest for libel may well be part of a concerted effort to harass him so that he will back down from his accusations.

And yet, it is not as though Fr. Nacorda and his parishioners have been the first and only ones to have called attention to the possible convergence of interests among the military, the government, and the Abu Sayyaf.

Two years ago, the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* alleged that the collusion between the Abu Sayyaf and the government went up to the highest levels of the cabinet. During the negotiations for the release of hostages abducted in the Malaysian Island of Sipadan on April 2000, a cabinet secretary very close to then President Joseph Estrada allegedly pocketed part of the millions of dollars in ransom money given to the Abu Sayyaf.³³

Aside from this, Abu Sayyaf victims have also previously laid bare the intimate relationship between the three. In *Into the Mountain*, a book about the experiences of hostages, Marissa Rante, a teacher who was abducted in March 2000, said she often overheard a ranking Abu Sayyaf leader speaking with someone on his two-radio, asking for details about a pending military attack. "What time will you attack us? What time exactly will the grenades hit us?" Marissa remembers the Abu Sayyaf leader asking. Because of this close coordination, the military would often overrun a camp just hours after the Abu Sayyaf had left.³⁴

Such coordination may sometimes even involve play-acting. When the Abu Sayyaf and their hostages were trekking through the mountains to transfer hideouts, the soldiers manning the posts at military detachments would often play deaf or blind. Others would even deliberately let the group pass. Even the guns being used by the kidnapers to fight soldiers came from the military itself. Fr. Nacorda's expose about military guns stored in Abu Sayyaf lairs was confirmed by a former member who has since defected. Military trucks would supposedly deliver the guns by leaving them by the side of the highway, covering them with leaves so as not

to arouse suspicion, for the Abu Sayyaf to retrieve later.³⁵

Both the Moro National Liberation Front and Moro Islamic Liberation Front, two rebel groups fighting for Muslim autonomy in Southern Philippines and from which most of the Abu Sayyaf members came from, believe that the Abu Sayyaf had been infiltrated by military intelligence agents. They point to a certain Edward Angeles, a police agent who joined the Abu Sayyaf as one of its original members.³⁶

Some even go as far as saying that the Abu Sayyaf was, in fact, created by the military for to discredit Islamic separatism and to stop the peace negotiations with the rebel groups. Proof of this, an MNLF leader said, is the suspicious timing in the rise of Abu Sayyaf activities: they always seem to be kidnapping people whenever peace negotiators are about to achieve a breakthrough.³⁷

As to Akbar, his relationship with the Abu Sayyaf is even more open to question this time. After all, he has been widely cited as one of the founders of the group.³⁸ He reportedly left the group after a leadership squabble and he did not get the top position. Akbar won as provincial governor in 1998 and was reelected in 2001. Some people say he has taken pains to show that he has severed his ties with Abu Sayyaf but there are still those who say that the bond remains strong until now. A number of locals interviewed by mission members claim that Akbar is still with the Abu Sayyaf and is profiting from every kidnapping case by acting as a negotiator. Former kidnap victims attest that the Abu Sayyaf members who abducted them presented themselves as the governor's men.

The extent to which the military and the government is linked with the Abu Sayyaf – whether it is contained among a random group of corrupt officers or whether it is systemic and reaches the highest ranking officers – cannot be conclusively established. But neither can it be dismissed with reasonable and responsible certainty. And while the allegations remain unanswered and the military remains suspended under a cloud of suspicion, the situation in Basilan cannot be characterized as a case of one party having to pursue another. It may be a case where that party will have to go after itself.

If the Abu Sayyaf problem can be resolved by simply addressing the charges of corruption and collusion among the military, the government, and the bandit group, then the intensified military operations and the entry of US forces – together with the corresponding problems accompanying them – may actually be unnecessary.

3. THE US MILITARY'S DEPLOYMENT IN BASILAN IS NOT ONLY UNJUSTIFIED BUT ALSO DANGEROUS.

THE UNITED STATES MAY NOT just be playing games with the Philippines.

Since February this year, US Special Operations Forces have been arriving in the country ostensibly for war games or joint training exercises aimed at enhancing the capability of the Philippine military to fight terrorism. A total of 660 military personnel are expected to turn up but the US has requested for the involvement of even more troops. Of these, 160 have been stationed in Basilan – a peculiar case of a war game being conducted where a real war is waging. In addition, unlike previous exercises which usually lasted for only three months at the longest, this one will go on from six to twelve months, with open options for extension – the longest known “military exercises” ever undertaken by the US with the Philippine military.³⁹

Taken in the context of Philippine history, this deployment will be the US' largest military engagement against real targets on Philippine territory since the Philippine-American War at the turn of the previous century. It is also the largest deployment of US troops in the Basilan-Zamboanga area since the Moro Wars of 1901-1913.⁴⁰

In a country that has had a long, stormy relationship with its former colonial master, the issue of the unusual war games erupted into a national controversy that has widely polarized the population. Because the arrival of US military personnel in the country has been the largest single deployment of US troops since the war in Afghanistan, the Philippines has been touted as the “second front” in the US' war against terrorism. US Senator Sam Brownback who sits on the foreign relations committee called the Philippines “the next target after Afghanistan.”⁴¹

The United States may not just be playing games with the Philippines.

The US had originally reportedly wanted to have its forces fight alongside the Philippine Armed Forces as combatants. As this is expressly banned in the Philippine constitution, however, an arrangement was made such that the US soldiers will merely serve as advisers and trainers to the Filipinos *but* in actual combat areas. None of all the security treaties or agreements between the Philippines and the United States allow for the deployment of military forces in *actual combat areas*.⁴² The government claims the joint exercises are covered by the Visiting Forces Agreement of 1998 and yet even its provisions were not followed.⁴³

Moreover, a *New York Times* editorial recently noted that the US military has "a long and ignoble history of announcing that it is dispatching American forces abroad as 'advisers,' when they are really meant to be combatants." In fact, just before arriving in Basilan, US military officials still thought they were being sent to actual military operations, newspaper reports said.⁴⁴

In the Philippines, security officials have been giving conflicting signals as to the US' purposes in Basilan. At the top, National Security Adviser Roilo Golez once described the exercises as an "on the job training" for the Americans, hinting that part of that job may be actual combat activities.⁴⁵ At first, President Arroyo said the exercises have nothing to do with the pursuit of the Abu Sayyaf.⁴⁶ On the ground, a military official interviewed by the mission in Basilan still believes this, insisting that the war games are not being staged for capturing a certain bandit group. Only later did Arroyo use the elimination of the Abu Sayyaf to gain public support for the exercises.

The vagueness, deliberate or otherwise, of the US's intentions in Abu Sayyaf is clear from US President George Bush's state of the union address. "While the most visible military action is in Afghanistan, America is acting elsewhere. We now have troops in the Philippines, helping to train that country's armed forces to go after terrorist cells that have executed an American and still hold hostages."⁴⁷ Are they in Basilan to train, to go after the terrorists, or to rescue the American hostages?

Perhaps the calculated ambiguity only serves to mask the true intentions. For as the peace mission has come to think after visiting Basilan, granting for the sake of

argument their three excuses, none still holds water. First, they cannot claim to be training the Filipino military because these soldiers are even more experienced. Second, they cannot claim to be pursuing the Abu Sayyaf as part of their mission to exterminate the Al Qaeda organization because there are no established links between the two. Finally, they cannot claim to be rescuing the Abu Sayyaf hostages because they can be rescued even without their help.

• THE PHILIPPINE MILITARY DOES NOT NEED TO BE TRAINED BY THE UNITED STATES.

The AFP's Philippine Army is acknowledged to be one of the best anti-guerrilla fighting forces in the world. "The Army as a counter-insurgency force is the most experienced and most battle tested in the world having been involved in a continuous cycle of military operations against guerilla groups since the end of World War II till the present, groups which operated on a fertile field of poverty and socio-economic structures of inequality and class antagonism," notes Prof. Roland Simbulan, an expert on the Philippine military.

For the last fifty years, the Philippine military has been at war with the HUKBALAHAP movement then the New People's Army on one front and the Muslim secessionist groups such as the MNLF and the MILF on another. Although its engagement had been punctuated by periodic ceasefires, the Philippine military has not had rest since World War II.

In contrast, the US military has been involved only in relatively brief, intermittent combat for the same period. Thus, between the American and the Filipino soldier, it is the latter that has had more actual uninterrupted fighting experience. Moreover, in terms of familiarity with the terrain and knowledge about the tactical strategies of the enemy, it is the Philippine military that has more to share with the US military – not the other way around.

In a visit to the military camp housing the Americans in Basilan, Philippine Army Major Salvador Calanoy disclosed that the US Special Forces were currently training them in medical evacuation and marksmanship – skills for which Filipino soldiers do not need specialized American instruction.

US military officer Major Max Carpenter agreed that their Filipino counterparts are "excellent soldiers."

As for the expensive cutting-edge military equipment, Calanoy said that the AFP has yet to get hold of them three months after they were promised to President Arroyo. More importantly, of what use will high precision spy planes be if on the ground certain military officials are relaying their attack schedules to the Abu Sayyaf?

The Philippine military does not need night vision goggles to track down the Abu Sayyaf. It may just need to open its eyes.

• THERE ARE NO CONCLUSIVE LINKS BETWEEN THE ABU SAYYAF AND BIN LADEN'S AL QAEDA.

A more credible and also more widely accepted explanation for the American's foray into Basilan is that they are out there to cut off a tentacle of Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization. Washington supposedly believes that the Abu Sayyaf is part of the extensive network of terrorist groups funded and supported by the Saudi billionaire whom they have tagged as responsible for the September 11 attacks.

Either the US knows something that everyone else does not or it is being extremely naïve. These two or the US is being *deceptively* naïve.

No less than President Arroyo has dismissed speculations about a relationship between the Abu Sayyaf and bin Laden. In fact, Arroyo thinks the Abu Sayyaf is just a "money-crazed gang of criminals," not an Islamic extremist group. Seven days after the September 11 attacks, presidential spokesperson Rigoberto Tiglao categorically declared that while the Abu Sayyaf may have been funded by bin Laden in the early 90s, "after 1995, or as early as 1995, there has been no bin Laden links with the Abu Sayyaf." Tiglao cited an intelligence report saying, "the Bin Laden people thought the Abu Sayyaf were too ignorant or too mercenary to join a world terrorist organization."⁴⁸

Even a ground officer in Basilan, Brigade Executive Major Calanoy, in a dialogue with the mission members, admitted without hesitation that the alleged link between the Abu Sayyaf and the Al Qaeda is tenuous. Calanoy says all they know is that the Abu Sayyaf has links with outside

terrorists. They have no evidence, though, to support the assertion that this outside network is, in fact, bin Laden's Al Qaeda.

It is probably because of this lack of proof that Philippine officials, unlike their American counterparts, have tended not to emphasize the alleged connection between the Abu Sayyaf and the Al Qaeda when explaining the need for the joint exercises to the public. It is puzzling though how the President and top security officials seem to have forgotten their public declaration clearing the Abu Sayyaf from complicity with the Al Qaeda. Either they are just forgetful or they are being *deceptively* forgetful.

• THE PHILIPPINE MILITARY SHOULD BE ABLE TO RESCUE THE HOSTAGES WITHOUT AMERICAN HELP

There are now an estimated 5,000 Filipino soldiers in Basilan. A total of seven Philippine army combat battalions are now stationed all over the island: the 10th Infantry Battalion in Lantawan, the 1st Scout Ranger Battalion and 55th Infantry Battalion in Isabela City, the 32nd Infantry Battalion in Tipo-tipo, the 18th Infantry Battalion in Lamitan, and two Philippine Marine Battalions in Maluso. Add to this the 12,000 members of the paramilitary group Citizens' Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGUs) and Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs) spread out all over Basilan.

According to Major Calanoy, the Abu Sayyaf has been reduced to less than 60 members. This means that at 17,000 soldiers and paramilitary troops on one hand and 60 Abu Sayyaf members on the other, every Abu Sayyaf member is now being pursued by at least 80 soldiers and 200 militiamen. It boggles the mind how a 17,000-strong force, with the full weight of its experience as well as the resources of the state behind it, has not been able to capture 60 "bandits." Either the Philippine military is actually – contrary to other's assessments of their fighting prowess – so unbelievably incompetent or there has been a gross mistake in the accounting: people who are actually members of the Abu Sayyaf were able to misrepresent themselves and were counted as soldiers.

As had been earlier elaborated, the central puzzle of how 60 men can elude thousands may be better explained less by charges of incompetence than of corruption. The problem in Basilan cannot be

...of what use will high precision spy planes be if on the ground certain military officials are relaying their attack schedules to the Abu Sayyaf?

solved by military means because it may in fact be political in nature, requiring a political solution, i.e., that the civilian authority over the armed forces muster enough political will to clean up the military. This is difficult because the incumbent President, who assumed power on the back of a popular uprising, feels that she owes her presidency to the military. Through the months, she has shown her tendency to pander to its wishes and her refusal to ruffle its feathers.

So if the US forces did not come to train the Philippine military, to get rid of an Al Qaeda cell, or to rescue hostages, what are they doing in Basilan? After going around the actual combat/training zones, the international peace mission is increasingly inclined to believe that the Americans are not just there to play games.

The motives, intentionally cloaked under layers of deliberate naïveté, may actually be more calculated, more strategic. The mission is worried that the US is actually implementing a methodical plan of establishing and expanding its presence in Southeast Asia to counter Islamic revivalist movements that threaten its national interests.

Because the US' aims do not always coincide with those of the Philippines, their presence in the southern Philippines may end up with the sacrifice of their hosts' national interests. First, fears regarding the breach of Philippine sovereignty are not unfounded. A number of legal luminaries have argued that the presence of US troops in the Philippines is in direct violation of an explicit prohibition in the Philippine constitution. Moreover, the Abu Sayyaf is clearly a domestic problem that must be addressed with domestic solutions. Inviting external intervention for an internal affair does little to strengthen the country's perennially vulnerable sense of sovereignty. Continued reliance on the US may only deepen the country's dependency.

Second, the US' involvement, by highlighting the government's preference for a military solution to the problem, may only serve as a distraction in efforts to identify the deeper roots of the ongoing conflict. A military solution conveniently forgets that, ultimately, the real enemies have always been the economic injustice, the religious discrimination, and the political subordination that the Muslims have been made to suffer through the years. Ultimately, these

are the realities that gave birth to and that have kept the Abu Sayyaf alive. Philippine contemporary history has shown the impotence of the military solution in solving the communist insurgency since the 1950s, the opposition during Martial Law, and the Muslim secessionist movement since the 1970s. There is no reason to believe that it will now be effective as a response to the Abu Sayyaf problem.

Bullets will kill the Abu Sayyaf members, but they will have done nothing to defeat the causes that animated them. In emphasizing the martial approach, other non-military, more difficult but possibly more effective solutions may end up being disregarded.

If, for instance, the US forces succeed in capturing the Abu Sayyaf, what happens to the accusations of collusion and the allegations of human rights violations committed by the military? What happens to the demand for ending religious insensitivity and economic exploitation? In the euphoria that is sure to follow, the charges of corruption and abuses may simply be swept under the thick forest cover; demands for change will be thrown to the sea. In the long run, concealed problems will not only be solved, they may even be aggravated.

But, more than the false solutions, the most disquieting concern about the US presence in southern Philippines lies in its potential to ignite a conflict wider and graver than the one that it had sought to end in the first place. There is a real fear that both peace negotiations with the MNLF and the MILF may eventually be undermined by US' intervention in the region. In fact, some MILF leaders are beginning to doubt the government's sincerity in pursuing non-military options to conflict resolution because of its apparent willingness to take the military route. Curiously, after the Abu Sayyaf, the MILF is also beginning to be linked with the Al Qaeda organization in reports given credence by *Time* and CNN.

Two mission members went to Cotabato City in mainland Mindanao to talk with key leaders of the MNLF and the MILF. According to MILF Vice Chair for Political Affairs Ghazali Jaafar, the MILF is concerned that they will be included as a target in the US' war against terrorism. They believe that Philippine military intelligence has been circulating rumors linking them to the Al Qaeda

network. Since the start of the training exercises, the MILF has been monitoring the movement of US military personnel in the mainland. They are convinced that the US military plans to construct a port in General Santos City.

With the US' deeply felt presence in Mindanao, there are apprehensions that the

domestic armed conflicts in the region will acquire international dimension and eventually blow up to a bigger war. In this scenario, the Philippines will become a base for a long-term war waged by the US against its enemies, whoever it may deem them to be. In this scenario, Basilan, long a stranger to peace, will meet a kind of war it has never known before.



Promoting Peace

THE MEMBERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL peace mission went to Basilan alarmed by reports that its citizens were being subjected to military abuses and afraid that the presence of American troops would further heighten the tension and escalate the conflict in the region. The members of the mission disembarked on the island concerned that it would become, in the words of a US senator, "the next Afghanistan."

They were even more worried when they came out.

First, the evidence of human rights violations perpetrated by the military cannot be conveniently and convincingly brushed aside. Despite the vehement denial of the government, the mission actually met and talked with people who claimed to have been arrested without warrants or tortured while in detention. The mission interviewed widows who said their husbands were extra judicially executed. The mission talked with families who will be evicted from their lands. The last thing that the mission can say after having returned from Basilan is that reports of human rights violations there proved to be unfounded.

The peace mission is worried that with its blanket denial policy, the government will not only turn a blind eye to the victims, it will also do nothing to alleviate their condition and do nothing to prevent more

violations. With this, the mission is worried that the Abu Sayyaf will grow even larger in numbers as human rights abuse victims eventually sign up for membership. For every civilian that the military arbitrarily arrests or tortures are several more fresh recruits for the Abu Sayyaf.

Second, allegations of close cooperation between the hunter and the hunted were backed up by the testimonies of dozens of witnesses with nothing to gain by coming out except serious threats to their lives. They narrated a clear tale of connivance between the military, the local government, and the Abu Sayyaf. Military officers and local politicians are said to be supplying guns to the Abu Sayyaf, informing them of attack details, ignoring them when they pass through checkpoints, and ensuring that they escape whenever they are cornered.

With this, the mission members look at the possibility of military solutions resolving what is apparently a complicated political problem with reinforced skepticism. What is needed in Basilan are not more troops, more firepower, and more cutting edge equipment. What is needed there is a determined political will to weed out corrupt elements in the military and the government.

The peace mission is worried that the government's refusal to seriously look into and act on these allegations of corruption

In the end, the civilian government's passive endorsement of the military's active complicity is more atrocious than the gruesome acts which they indirectly allow the Abu Sayyaf to perpetrate.

In light of the Philippine government's policy of denial and inaction regarding these disturbing findings, the international peace mission issues a strong call to action to the United Nations, the European Parliament, the US Congress, Amnesty International and all other international organizations committed to upholding the human rights of people everywhere to take up the plight of the people of Basilan.

will ultimately be the reason why 5,000 soldiers have failed and may still fail to capture a band of 60 kidnapers. The government's penchant for looking the other way, by sending a signal of tacit approval, can only embolden corrupt officials to continue in their wayward ways. In the end, the civilian government's passive endorsement of the military's active complicity is more atrocious than the gruesome acts which they indirectly allow the Abu Sayyaf to perpetrate.

Third, all of the United States' avowed reasons for deploying troops in Basilan are groundless. They are not there to train soldiers that are more experienced in combat and more familiar with the terrain than them. They are not there to exterminate an Al Qaeda cell because the Abu Sayyaf's supposed links to bin Laden have proven to be unsubstantiated. They are not there to rescue their hostages because the Philippine military, if it only stops informing the Abu Sayyaf of its attack schedule, could very well do that for them. In other words, the Americans are not in Basilan for any of the above reasons.

Because of these well-justified doubts about their motives, the peace mission is inclined to believe that US forces are seeing action in Basilan for reasons more strategic. The peace mission is worried that the US may be laying the groundwork for establishing and expanding a more direct military presence in southern Philippines to ward off Muslim revivalist movements in Southeast Asia. The peace mission is worried that the Philippines' sovereignty will be impaired not only by relying on an external actor to solve its own domestic woes; but more so, by allowing itself to be used in advancing national interests that it does not share. The peace mission is troubled by the increased possibility of renewed and reinvigorated fighting stoked by the presence of the United States on the islands.

It did not help to assuage the mission's anxieties that, despite assurances to the contrary, the national and local government made it more difficult for the peace mission to conduct its investigation. The provincial governor prevented the mission from entering a jail housing the strongest collective proof of human rights violations in the province. There was evidently a deliberate effort to prevent victims from coming out in a congressional hearing. Ranking officers of the Philippine and US

military who have made commitments to hold a dialogue with the mission members were nowhere to be found on the appointed time. It seemed as though the Philippine government was intent on giving the impression that there is something that it did not want the mission to see. It kept saying that there is nothing to hide but it did not want the mission to see this for themselves.

Despite the limited time and the lack of cooperation from the government, however, a broad picture of abuse, corruption, and looming escalation emerged and stories that have to be told were heard and will now be retold again.

In light of the Philippine government's policy of denial and inaction regarding these disturbing findings, the international peace mission issues a strong call to action to the United Nations, the European Parliament, the US Congress, Amnesty International and all other international organizations committed to upholding the human rights of people everywhere to take up the plight of the people of Basilan. We specifically recommend:

- A more thorough and more systematic investigation of the human rights violations in Basilan, building on the findings of previous fact-finding missions such as those of the Commission on Human Rights and KARAPATAN. This is necessary not only for convincing those who are still unconvinced but also for identifying those who need help.
- A more focused and concentrated effort to establish permanent, or strengthen existing, support groups helping human rights victims in the province. There is a serious and urgent need to provide security to witnesses because the possibility of reprisal is all too real. There is a need to give them psychological and economic support. Given that the government has denied

their existence, human rights victims have nowhere to turn to for assistance. As it is, civil society groups like the Moro Human Rights Center and the Moro-Christian alliance that are looking after these victims are ill funded, understaffed, and always under threat.

- A more concerted appeal coming from all fronts for the Philippine government to look first before denying; to earnestly investigate allegations of military abuse and corruption, to punish the guilty, to compensate the victims, and to do everything in its power to prevent further human rights violations and connivance with the Abu Sayyaf. These may yet be the government's best strategies for successfully going after the Abu Sayyaf.
- An intensified campaign by civil society groups and governments, especially those in the Asia Pacific, for a review of the US military's presence in Basilan given that its intentions may have been deliberately obscured.
- A more vigorous and more extensive dissemination of information regarding the true situation in Basilan. This is

particularly important since the media coverage on Basilan has tended to focus mainly on the military's pursuit of the Abu Sayyaf. Little has been heard about the condition of the human rights victims. There is thus a need to counter the distorted representation of Basilan being purveyed by the international press.

The plight of the people of Basilan should be the concern of people everywhere. We call on international institutions and organizations, parliaments, multilateral agencies, and civil society movements to contribute in any meaningful way to the alleviation of the condition of a people caught in the crossfire of a war not of their own making. Previous conflicts in many other parts of the world were resolved through the committed mediation of third parties dedicated to dialogue and reconciliation. This is the kind of mediation urgently needed in Basilan.

Unless we act now, the rights of the helpless people of Basilan will continue to be abused. More and more human rights victims will be compelled to become fresh recruits for the Abu Sayyaf and the conflict will only heighten. Unless we act now, the collusion between the military and the Abu Sayyaf will remain unchecked. Innocent civilians as well as honest soldiers will continue to be the victims. Unless we act now, the US presence in southern Philippines may ignite a conflict wider and graver than the one raging now.

Unless we act now, Basilan may yet really become, in a sense, "the next Afghanistan."



ENDNOTES

- ¹ For more on the history of the conflict in Mindanao, see Kristina Gaerlan and Mara Stankovitch (eds.) *Rebels, Warlords, and Ulama: A Reader on Muslim Separatism and the War in Southern Philippines*, (Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000)
- ² "Bush pledges to wipe out RP terror cells" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 31, 2000.
- ³ "The Philippines: War on terror's second front" in <http://asia.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/southeast/04/16/phil.blair/>
- ⁴ "US Senator says RP next Afghanistan" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 18, 2000.
- ⁵ "Philippine Human Development Report 2000" in www.hdn.org.ph/phdr20tab411.htm
- ⁶ National Statistics Office, *Selected Poverty Indicators of the Bottom 40%* (Ranking of Provinces) based on the 1998 Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS)
- ⁷ Jose Torres, Jr. *Into the Mountain: Hostaged by the Abu Sayyaf* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2001), 169.
- ⁸ "GMA defends soldiers, says charges of human rights abuses an insult" by Rolando Fernandez, Vincent Cabreza and Julie Alipala *Philippine Daily Inquirer* March 24, 2002
- ⁹ "Int'l 'peace' mission blocked in Basilan" by Julie S. Alipala, Carlito Pablo, and Donna S. Cueto *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 24, 2002
- ¹⁰ "Peace mission 'raised more questions than answers'" by Donna S. Cueto and Carlito Pablo *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 27, 2002
- ¹¹ "Int'l peace mission meddling in RP affairs: Golez" by Fe B. Zamora INQ7.net, March 26, 2002
- ¹² "Golez hits foreign intervention" by Carlito Pablo *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 26, 2002.
- ¹³ "Gov't asked to probe peace mission in Basilan" by Lira Dalangin, INQ7.net, March 27, 2002
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ "In the Battlefields of the Warlord" by Eric Gutierrez in *Rebels, Warlords, and Ulama: A Reader on Muslim Separatism and the War in Southern Philippines*, (Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000), 62.
- ¹⁶ "New Faces of Violence in Muslim Mindanao" by Eric Gutierrez in *Rebels, Warlords, and Ulama: A Reader on Muslim Separatism and the War in Southern Philippines*, ed. Kristina Gaerlan and Mara Stankovitch (Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000), 354.
- ¹⁷ Marites Dañguilan Vitug and Glenda M. Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao* (Quezon City: Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs and Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000), 205.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.
- ²⁰ "New faces of violence in Muslim Mindanao," 353.
- ²¹ "In the Battlefields of the Warlord", 63.
- ²² Marites Dañguilan Vitug and Glenda M. Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao*, 235-236.
- ²³ Various Reports of The Commission on Human Rights Regional Office No. IX dated 18 July 2001, 26 July 2001, and 8 August 2001 with 32 attached affidavits complaints, 6 medico-legal certificates, and 5 pictures.,
- ²⁴ "More stories of torture, other rights abuse in Basilan" by Froilan Gallardo *Mindaneans*, April 10, 2002.

- ²⁵ "Philippine mother says rebel-suspect son tortured" *Reuters*, April 10, 2002.
- ²⁶ See Commission on Human Rights Regional Office IX Resolution dated August 17, 2001 and Supplemental Resolution dated December 3, 2001; See also Epilogue of Jose Torres Jr. *Into the Mountain: bostaged by the Abu Sayyaf* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2001), 143-151.
- ²⁷ Testimony of Fe S. Castro
- ²⁸ Affidavit of Joel B. Notario
- ²⁹ Testimony of Jaime dela Cruz
- ³⁰ Testimony of Captain Ruben Guinolbay
- ³¹ Testimony of Army Corporal Paisal Sapii
- ³² "Army-Abu connivance product of sick mind," says general" INQ7.net August 11, 2001.
- ³³ "Estrada denies German ransom allegations" in http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/asia-pacific/newsid_1065000/1065475.stm
- ³⁴ Jose Torres, Jr. *Into the Mountain: bostaged by the Abu Sayyaf*, 147.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 39-40.
- ³⁶ Marites Dañguilan Vitug and Glenda Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao*, 192-221.
- ³⁷ Eric Gutierrez. "New Faces of Violence in Muslim Mindanao,"62.
- ³⁸ Jose Torres, Jr. *Into the Mountain: bostaged by the Abu Sayyaf*, 33; Marites Dañguilan Vitug and Glenda Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao*, 209; "Americans are fighting the wrong Philippine war" by Nicholas D. Kristof *International Herald Tribune*, February 20, 2002; "From Religion to Terrorism: Abu Sayyaf in the South Philippines Jungle" by Manfred Rist in www.nzz.ch/english/background/2002/02/07_philippines.html; "Is the US really fighting al Qaeda terrorists in the Philippines, or merely trying to restore the army bases it lost after Vietnam?" by Mark Baker *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 10, 2002.
- ³⁹ "The US Military Intervention in the Philippines: A New Phase" by Roland Simbulan *Forum*, March 28, 2002, .6.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ "US Senator says RP next Afghanistan" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 18, 2000.
- ⁴² "The US Military Intervention in the Philippines: A New Phase"
- ⁴³ Maria Socorro I. Diokno, "Kalayaang Aguila 2002: The Death Knell of Philippine Society," 2002.
- ⁴⁴ Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "Balikatan: Tripwire to a Bigger, Internationalized War." 2002.
- ⁴⁵ "Balikatan: Tripwire to a Bigger, Internationalized War." 2002.
- ⁴⁶ "GMA, Reyes not singing same song on US troops" by Tony Bergonia *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 31, 2002.
- ⁴⁷ "Bush pledges to wipe out RP terror cells" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 31, 2000.
- ⁴⁸ "Abu Sayyaf-Bin Laden link cut in '95, says Palace" by Juliet Labog-Javellana *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, September 18, 2001.



REFERENCES

- Bello, Walden. "Afghanistan II or Mogadishu II: The Philippines as 'Second Front'." *The Nation*. March 18, 2002.
- Diokno, Maria Socorro I. "Kalayaang Aguila 2002: The Death Knell of Philippine Society." 2002.
- Gaerlan, Kristina and Mara Stankovitch (eds). *Rebels, Warlords and Ulama: A Reader on Muslim Separatism and the War in Southern Philippines*. Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000.
- Gloria, Glenda M. and Marites Dañguilan Vitug. *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao*. Quezon City: Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs and Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000.
- Quimpo, Nathan Gilbert. "Balikatan: Tripwire to a Bigger, Internationalized War." 2002.
- Scarborough, Rowan. "US starts to answer, 'What's next?' in terror war?" *The Washington Times*. January 31, 2002.
- Simbulan, Roland. "The US Military Intervention in the Philippines: A New Phase." *Forum*. March 28, 2002.
- Torres, Jose Jr. *Into the Mountain: hostaged by the Abu Sayyaf*. Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2001.
- Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Various issues.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Moro-Christian Alliance and the Moro Human Rights Center for the extensive assistance in Basilan and Zamboanga City

Fr. Cirilo Nacorda

Marylou Malig for overall logistical coordination

Ronald Llamas and Rafael Albert for organizing the Basilan and Zamboanga legs of the mission

Carla Montemayor, Lourdes Alicias, and Ana Sotelo for the media relations work

Herbert Docena for preparing the draft of this report

RA Rivera and Jun Sabayton for film documentation

Joy Chavez, Lourdes Torres, Chirawatana Chantapatarapoong for general support

THIS MISSION WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF

Inter Pares

Novib

Oxfam Solidarity

Oxfam Hongkong

11-11-11 (NCOS)

