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Non-State Actors in the Philippines

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Soldiers prepare to detonate landmines made of dynamite sticks. They were recovered by pursuing troops near the former Muslim rebels' stronghold on Mt. Puno Mohaji, which was overrun by Army Scout Rangers.

Non-State Actors in the PHILIPPINES

Background

On December 3, 1997, the Philippines signed the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention to end mine use in the country. However, implementation of this act did not come soon enough to prevent the loss of innocent lives from terrorist attacks that began in the early 1990s and continue through today. In the Philippines, several main rebel groups terrorize the countryside, creating havoc in order to further their own interests. They are non-state actors (NSAs), rebel groups who fight for certain beliefs. Geneva Call defines a NSAs as "any armed actor operating outside state control that uses force to achieve its political/quasi-political objectives. They include armed groups, rebel groups, liberation movements and de facto governments."

In the Philippines, these groups include the Abu Sayyaf, New People's Army (NPA),

the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The rebel group Abu Sayyaf continues to inflict the most damage on people and property as it works towards creating an independent Islamic state in the south. Each of the above groups has been accused of laying landmines resulting in the death and injury of soldiers and civilians.

Abu Sayyaf

Abu Sayyaf, meaning "father of the sword" or "bearer of the sword," is the Philippines' smallest yet most radical rebel group. Focusing primarily in the southern islands and into Malaysia, the Abu Sayyaf bomb, assassinate, kidnap and perform extortion in order to make their views known and to aid their funds for destruction. Ransom kidnapping has proven the most profitable, earning them at

times millions of dollars for one hostage situation.

Abu Sayyaf was organized in 1986 by Ustadz Abdurajak Janjalani as a response to the Christian influence in the country. The goal of Abu Sayyaf is to form a separate Islamic state for the country's Muslim minority, who live mainly in the southern areas.

Although the group boasted eight founders, Abdurajak was the obvious leader, attracting young Muslim scholars to his cause. Abdurajak died in 1998 in a confrontation with the Philippine police, and his brother Khadafi Janjalani took on the leadership role.

Abu Sayyaf's first recorded attack came in 1991; however, the group really put itself on the map with an incident that occurred in 1992, when it carried out bomb attacks on Zamboanga City and Davao City. In April of 1993, the organization kidnapped five-year-old Luis "Ton-Ton" Biel along with his grandfather in Basilan. After the Biel kidnapping situation was resolved, the military forced the Abus to leave Mt. Kapayawan.

Abu Sayyaf is suspected to be a part of al Qaeda, but no evidence of cooperation between the two has been found since 1996. Philippine president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo said, "We will continue this pursuit until this group has been brought to justice."

New People's Army

The NPA is the military wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Formed in March of 1969, the NPA focuses its efforts on overthrowing the government through guerilla warfare. Jose Maria Sison founded the group and reportedly directs the CPP and the NPA from the Netherlands. Although the NPA is primarily based in rural areas, an active urban infrastructure lends the NPA to terrorist and assassination acts. Funding for the NPA comes from supporters in the Philippines, Europe and other countries as well as "revolutionary taxes" received from local businesses and politicians.

Target citizens of the NPA include Philippine security forces, politicians, judges, government informers, former rebels wanting to leave the NPA, rival splinter groups and alleged criminals. The U.S. military presence in the Philippines faced opposition from the

NPA until several U.S. bases closed in 1992. However, according to press reports in 1999 and 2001, the NPA may again be targeting U.S. troops. According to the Federation American Scientists (FAS) website, "In January 2002, the NPA publicly expressed its intent to target U.S. personnel if discovered in NPA operating areas."

The NPA has an estimated 10,000+ members and operates in Luzon, Visayas and parts of Mindanao. Most of its members come from peasant backgrounds and membership is open to anyone 18 years old or older who is physically fit and willing and ready to fight for freedom.

Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)

Moro insurgence movements have dated back to Spanish rule with resistance especially strong among the Muslim population of southwestern Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. Widespread conflict erupted in the 1970s, as the Filipino Muslims remained resistant to Manila's rule.

The Moros severely disliked the immigration of Christians and their impact on the land, economic resources and political power. A sense of anger fell on the Moros, who were becoming minorities in their own land. A martial law in 1972 required all persons to put down arms, and this led to a rebellion among the Moros, whose traditional religious beliefs gave them the right to carry arms. The MNLF was born at this time in response to the rebellion, a conceptualization of Abul Khayr Alonto and Jallaludin Santos, who at the time were with the Bangsa Moro Movement. Young Muslims were recruited, as was the support of Nur Misuari, a professor at the University of Philippines who was with the leftist movement Kabataang Makabayan. The MNLF received backing from Muslims in Libya and Malaysia.

Between 1973 and 1975, a brutal conflict broke out between 30,000 armed MNLF fighters and 70-80 percent of the military. An estimated 50,000 people, both military and civilian, were killed. As a result of ensuing government tactics as well as a slow down in arms from Malaysia, conflict began to decrease in 1976. An agreement between the MNLF and the Philippine government was

made in late 1976 that provided the Moros with autonomy in the southern Philippines. The truce broke, however, in 1977.

A three-way split occurred within the MNLF in the late 1970s resulting in the MILF, the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization and the Moro National Liberation Front/Reformist Movement. Although movement has waned among the Moro groups since the 1980s, their presence is still very much alive. Moros continue to fight for what they feel is their rightful land.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)

In 1977, Hashim Salamat split from the MNLF with the purpose of organizing a new group that supported a more moderate and conciliatory approach to the government. His new group, the MILF, became official in March of 1984 and since then has sought to establish an independent Islamic state. The MILF is currently the largest Islamic separatist group in the Philippines with approximately 15,000 members.

Civilians and military groups have been targeted by the MILF through various attacks in an effort to claim authority over Mindanao island, Palawan, Basilan, the Sulu archipelago and neighboring islands. The MILF feels threatened by Christian presence in southern Mindanao and by the presence of Philippine army troops. Key members of MILF have been linked to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network, and in 1999, Salamat admitted to receiving "significant funding" from bin Laden.

Landmines and Rebel Groups

Abu Sayyaf

Abu Sayyaf has used landmines in its struggle against Christians. In the last two years, the group has been accused of laying mines and/or explosive devices on the southern island of Lugas. In addition, a blasting cap and an improvised landmine were found after an ambush of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) imposed by the Abu Sayyaf. Overall, there have been several civilian injuries resulting from Abu Sayyaf mine use.

by Ellie Lowman, MHC

New People's Army

Abu Sayyaf is not the only rebel group to utilize landmines. Occasional incidents are reported that lead back to the NPA. For example, on June 20, 2002, a military truck with soldiers belonging to the army's 34th Infantry Battalion hit a landmine in the road in the Visayas islands of the Samar province. The following December, a military jeep hit a landmine laid by the NPA near a bridge in Catarman of the Samar province. The NPA has also been responsible for other incidents regarding "dissident terrorists" and Armed Forces of the Philippines patrols. In northern Luzon, the military reported confiscating 260 pieces of C-4 explosives from the NPA in Balbalan town, Kalinga province. The NPA has stated that it uses improvised anti-vehicle and anti-personnel mines only in command-detonated mode.

Moro National Liberation Front

The MNLF signed a peace agreement with the Philippine government in 1996 and no landmine issues arose until 2001. In November of 2001, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were found at the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao government complex in Cabatangan, Zamboang. The AFP reported recovery of five improvised anti-personnel mines, 10 anti-vehicle mines and 200 kilos of improvised explosives, among other items.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front

Over the past few years, several landmine incidents have allegedly occurred in MILF-

controlled areas. MILF representative Atty. Lanang S. Ali on March 27, 2000, signed a Deed of Commitment under Geneva Call for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action in Geneva. Due to some violations and weaknesses in the first agreement, the MILF signed a new, clearer Deed of Commitment in April 2002. The MILF has issued written orders and directives to its forces regarding the ban and has conducted mine and humanitarian education programs for its leaders and soldiers. The 2003 *Landmine Monitor Report's* AFP sources reported that the MILF has continued use of anti-personnel mines. According to the same sources, these mines were planted in areas where AFP soldiers are likely to work on clearing mines. As reported by the 2003 *Landmine Monitor Report*, the MILF retaliated with mine use after a February 2003 offensive initiated by the AFP on the MILF. Between March and April 2003, the 6th Infantry Division in Maguindanao reported four separate landmine explosions. In March 2003, the AFP reported finding live landmines close to bunkers and trenches around former MILF camps. Many of these allegations of mine use are still unconfirmed. In addition, according to the 2004 *Landmine Monitor Report*, two landmine incidents were attributed to the MILF between April 2003 and March 2004. However, the MILF denied involvement in both incidents as well as training of NPA rebels to manufacture explosives, landmines and M79 grenade launchers.

Conclusion

Over the years, the Philippines has faced a variety of insurgency groups that led to destruction and chaos. As time passes, the

problems seem to decrease in numbers but remain constant in threat. The environment is still touchy and the lives of innocent people are at risk on a daily basis. Efforts have been made to reduce landmine use and strengthen civilian morale in order to improve quality of life. However, NSAs cannot be rushed and patience is a necessary element.

The presence of landmine use by NSAs increases stress and tension in the lives of innocent civilians. The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) has worked in the Philippines to reduce the amount of landmine use by rebel groups. An acknowledgement of the mine problem as well as various levels of agreement has been made by NSAs in cooperation with the ICBL.

* Photo c/o AP.

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