

Mindanao Muddle

By Zachary Abuza

In the more than two weeks since an explosion rocked Manila's largest shopping center, the Glorietta Mall, speculation has been rife about who or what was responsible for the blast. The local press blames terrorist groups, while foreign inspectors say it might have been an accidental gas explosion. But the mere possibility that it was a deliberate attack sheds an unwelcome light on the government's ineffectual battle against terrorism. Confronted with a complex array of active threats, Manila is eschewing a coordinated game plan in favor of something resembling a county fair's whack-a-mole game—confronting one threat at a time, while another pops up, and grows.

The greatest unrest is centered in the southern provinces, home to the bulk of the Philippines' Muslim population, and four different terrorist groups. Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah has maintained training camps there since the mid-1990s, and while its goal of establishing a regional caliphate has dimmed, the camps do provide a rear area to regroup from its activities elsewhere in the region. Abu Sayyaf, another terror organization with some international links, has been sporadically active in these provinces since 1991 with an eye to ostensibly establishing an independent Islamic state.

Then there are the homegrown Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), an Islamist group fighting for an independent homeland, and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a secular group whose members are increasingly disillusioned with the peace agreement they signed with the government nearly 11 years ago. Both hope to achieve an independent homeland, but have been unable to get more than offers of autonomy.

Fighting all of these groups at the same time is devilishly hard, not least because they also fight amongst themselves, making conflicting demands of the government. For example, the MILF and MNLF aren't on speaking terms owing to a dispute over the legitimacy of a political settlement reached between the Philippine government and MNLF in 1996. The MNLF leadership considers the group the only true representatives of the Bangsamoro

people of the region and views the 1996 agreement between it and Manila as binding. MILF, which currently has more men under arms, considers MNLF a bunch of corrupted, un-Islamic sell-outs. Meantime, the secular MNLF still claims the Malaysian state of Sabah, and claim the Islamic MILF "sold out" for the group's willingness to tolerate Malay sovereignty over the state. Both cooperate to a varying degree with the Abu Sayyaf.

Manila must stop playing whack-a-mole with terrorists.

Over her seven-year term, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has focused most of her attention on offensives against Abu Sayyaf, which have been marginally successful. With considerable U.S. military assistance, training and operational intelligence, the Philippine military was able to concentrate their meager resources in Basilan and Jolo. Few expected the Philippine military to sustain the offensive against Abu Sayyaf over the past 16 months, but it has. Since August 2006, six known leaders with bounties on their heads have been killed, including Ismin Sahiron, Abu Solaiman and the group's nominal leader, Khadaffy Janjalani.

A number of mid-level Jemaah Islamiyah operatives have been arrested, too. Even though two of the 2002 Bali bombers are still at large and working with Abu Sayyaf, they are not adding real value to the terrorist group, as they are constantly on the run. The JI training facilities in central Mindanao are clearly smaller than they were even a few years ago. Overall, the southern Philippines today is a much less hospitable operating environment for terrorists than in the past.

But while the international terror threat may have abated for now, the Philippines' homegrown insurgent groups, the MNLF and the MILF, have become frustrated with their respective peace processes, and 2006-07 saw an alarming number of cease-fire violations.

Blame goes to a lack of attention from President Arroyo's administration and deep divisions within her government between hardliners in the armed forces and the congress who oppose further autonomy concessions, and advocates of peace within the cabinet. Earlier this year, President Arroyo's chief negotiator, Silvester Afable, quit in frustration.

To see what this means in practice,

take first MILF, which has been fighting for an independent Islamic state since 1978 and now controls swaths of central Mindanao. While the government first entered into talks with MILF in 1997, progress has come in fits and starts. Talks broke down in September 2006, over a dispute of what constitutes MILF's "ancestral domain."

In 1995-96, MILF apparently abandoned its demand for an independent homeland and accepted an autonomy agreement in the closed-door negotiations. But the two



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sides can't agree on what that territory, called the "Bangsamoro Juridical Entity," will entail. MILF claims some 1,200 villages, plus the five provinces and two cities "ceded" in the 1996 agreement the government reached with MNLF. The government offer encompasses roughly half of that area. Neither have they agreed on how to govern the BJE: Manila proposes "enhanced autonomy," while MILF wants full autonomy.

As the peace talks have stalled, the ceasefire has unraveled. The number of skirmishes increased 18% this year compared to the same period last year, prompting the Malaysian peace monitors to threaten to pull out.

Meanwhile MNLF has tried in vain to get Manila to re-engage in talks to address the sections of its own accord that have not been implemented. In January, the Philippine government refused, citing the ongoing discussions with MILF. Little wonder that in March and April, two separate MNLF units took up arms and attacked Philippine military forces (including a

camp where U.S. Special forces are based) in Jolo and Zamboanga. These units have now joined Abu Sayyaf, nearly quadrupling their ranks to roughly 300-400.

The last point aptly illustrates the perils of Manila's multipronged approach to its multipronged terror threat. The government is trying to distinguish between different terrorist groups, negotiating with some and taking military action against others. But, for example, it becomes harder and harder to argue that MNLF poses a political problem and Abu Sayyaf a policing problem when the two groups are willing to cooperate with each other. On the other side of the same coin, it's difficult if not impossible to negotiate with MILF and MNLF for the same patch of land when the two won't talk to each other.

Rather than trying to tackle each problem group individually, President Arroyo must come up with a comprehensive plan for peace in Mindanao for all the Moro groups, not the whack-a-mole policies in

place today. The government must create a peace process that reconciles the 1996 MNLF agreement and the ongoing BJE framework, and create a power-sharing structure, perhaps at the federal level, for the contending Moro groups. All branches of the Philippine government must be committed to the full implementation of agreements that they sign and not water down the autonomy agreements. Policing must continue, but the government must be careful not to let operations against one group spill over, in order not to put pressure on the fragile cease-fires.

The Philippines' terror situation remains in flux, and the groups, while not having formal ties, often cooperate with one another. Sadly, there are spoilers on all sides. This island nation is likely to remain the soft underbelly for regional security for some time to come.

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Resolving the Kurdish Dilemma

By Edward P. Joseph
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As President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice prepare for this week's crucial meetings with Turkey's leaders about the attacks by Kurdish PKK rebels, they should look beyond crisis management to deal with the wider Turkish-Kurdish agenda. If they do, it is possible that the political stalemate within Iraq can begin to be broken as well. Broadening the agenda could make diplomacy easier.

Iraq's responsible Kurdish establishment is appealing to Washington for support. Kurdish leaders like Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih see the U.S. as the indispensable player in resolving the crisis. Turkey has put aside anger over a recent Congressional resolution on the Armenian genocide; it also looks to Washington to advance its legitimate demand that the PKK threat in northern Iraq be dealt with once and for all.

The problem is that, while Washington is relevant politically, it will be tough to broker a deal that will meet Turkish expectations. The momentum in Turkey towards a decisive military confrontation is strong. So is the resistance in the Kurdish region of Iraq towards a crackdown on the PKK, which is popular among Kurds along both

sides of the border.

Mr. Bush and Ms. Rice may be tempted to simply soothe tempers and focus on the PKK problem. But all indications are that won't solve much. And a Turkish invasion, even if limited to the Qandil Mountain stronghold of the PKK, could have disastrous consequences. It would destabilize the most successful part of Iraq and further solidify Kurdish nationalism—rendering compromise over the flashpoint, oil-rich town of Kirkuk even more difficult.

Averting crisis in Kurdistan requires dealing with the three most neuralgic issues: the PKK, oil and Kirkuk. Turkey sees Kurdish control of Kirkuk and its oil as the precursor to a Kurdistan independent from Iraq, which could in turn lead to the violent breakaway of Turkey's Kurdish region. Iraqi Kurds see Kirkuk as an inalienable piece of Kurdish patrimony and a source of revenue-producing oil and gas. A comprehensive deal will take some time to negotiate. But a signal from Washington to finally deal with all these issues, and make tradeoffs across all three, could be the key to defusing the current crisis.

Instead of simply delaying resolution of

Kirkuk, as Washington has asked the Kurds to do so far, the U.S. should table creative options like giving the town a "special status" under the Iraqi constitution. The constitution's wide federalism provisions permit making Kirkuk its own region, while at the same time guaranteeing full power-sharing and property rights for its Turkomen, Arab and other minorities.

While not achieving maximal Kurdish aspirations to reclaim all of Kirkuk under their control, a special status would advance much of the Kurdish agenda without crossing Turkish red lines. It would also stimulate much-needed dialogue with Kirkuk's sizeable non-Kurdish minority, roughly 40% of the population.

As for oil, the Kurds have been a major obstacle to a comprehensive package on production and revenue-sharing necessary for a political settlement in Iraq as a whole. In July, a breakthrough seemed close, but fell apart largely over Kurdish concerns about their autonomy to enter into contracts unfettered by Baghdad. Likewise, the question of whether Kirkuk's oil and gas is from "current fields" (subject to sharing with others in Iraq) or "new fields" (possibly ex-

empt from the same kind of sharing) is another nettlesome question that has so far defied resolution.

Up to now, Kurdish leaders have adroitly played their role as "kingmaker" in Baghdad—helping determine which Shiite leader governs Iraq in exchange for freedom to assert their demands on oil and Kirkuk. Now, these same Kurdish leaders, facing their most serious crisis since the U.S. invasion in 2003, might be more willing to listen to creative, carefully crafted proposals from Washington.

An oil deal addressing Kurdish concerns about interference from Baghdad, while providing firm guarantees about production and revenue sharing, is certainly possible. And a breakthrough on oil could advance discussions on the other political questions. Progress on Kirkuk might make possible a badly needed conversation in Baghdad on political arrangements to accommodate the concerns of the capital's mixed populations (such as helping people to relocate safely if they feel the need), while acknowledging the reality, as seen in Kirkuk, that the country's demographics have been altered by war.

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