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Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation

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Larry Nicksch
Specialist in Asian Affairs
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

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Summary

From January 2002 until July 31, 2002, the United States committed nearly 1,300 troops to the Philippines and \$93 million in military aid to assist Philippine armed forces (AFP) in operations against the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group in the southern Philippines, on the island of Basilan southwest of Mindanao. The U.S. action, dubbed Operation Balikatan, partly was in response to Philippine President Arroyo's strong support of the United States following the September 11 Al Qaeda attack on the United States. A historic Muslim resistance to non-Muslim rulers broke out into massive rebellion in the 1970s. Two large resistance groups, a Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and a Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fought the Philippine government into the 1990s and entered into tenuous truces in 1996 and 2001 respectively. Abu Sayyaf emerged in 1990 as a splinter group composed of former MNLF fighters and Filipinos who had fought in Afghanistan. Abu Sayyaf resorted to terrorist tactics, including executions of civilians, bombings, and increasingly kidnappings for ransom. Abu Sayyaf had links with Osamu bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization in the early 1990s, but these links reportedly dwindled in the late 1990s. After the 2002 Balikatan operation, the remaining Abu Sayyaf leadership established links with Jeemah Islamiah (JI), an Al Qaeda-affiliated group in Southeast Asia that had begun to use Mindanao for training and organizing terrorist strikes. Abu Sayyaf also established links with Rajah Solaiman, a radical Muslim group made up of Filipinos from the northern Philippines who had converted to Islam. Together, these groups carried out major bombings after 2003, including bombings in metropolitan Manila.

Philippine government policy has been to apply military pressure on Abu Sayyaf. Operations have been constrained by several factors including difficult terrain, inadequate Philippine military equipment, avoiding clashing with the MILF and MNLF, and reportedly high level of corruption in the Philippine military. U.S. military support, however, did achieve successes. AFP operations against Abu Sayyaf became more aggressive and effective against Abu Sayyaf on Basilan in 2002 and on Jolo island in 2006; Abu Sayyaf strength was seriously eroded to an estimated 200 and key commanders have been killed. AFP commanders praised U.S. equipment, U.S. intelligence gathering, and U.S. assistance in planning AFP operations. The U.S. military's civic action project on Basilan appeared to weaken support for Abu Sayyaf on the island and received general praise in the Philippines.

In 2005, U.S. forces began direct support missions for the Philippine military in western Mindanao against Abu Sayyaf, and U.S. military personnel began non-combat missions on the Abu Sayyaf redoubt of Jolo Island. U.S. officials expressed growing concern over the presence of JI on Mindanao and links between JI and the MILF. The Bush Administration supported the ongoing peace talks between the Philippine government and the MILF as the best means of eroding the MILF-JI linkage. However, coordination among Abu Sayyaf, JI, and elements of the MILF present the threat of a wider terrorist war in the Philippines and could confront the Bush Administration with decisions for greater U.S. involvement.

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Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation

The Philippine Response to September 11

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo voiced strong support for the United States in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack. The Philippines, she said, is prepared to “go every step of the way” with the United States. President Arroyo allowed U.S. military forces to use Filipino ports and airfields to support military operations in Afghanistan. She cited morality and Philippine national interests as reasons for her pro-U.S. stand. She defined the national interest as linking a struggle against international terrorism with the struggle against terrorism within the Philippines.¹ She supported the U.S. war against Iraq in March 2003, offering the U.S. military air space and refueling facilities and sent about 100 Filipino military personnel to Iraq for postwar assistance.² However, in 2004, she withdrew the Filipino contingent from Iraq after Iraqi insurgents kidnaped a Filipino contract worker and threatened to kill him.

Philippine terrorism has been multifaceted for at least three decades and has been carried out by different groups with different agendas. A significant communist insurgency, the New Peoples Army (NPA) in the 1970s and 1980s engaged in bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings. The communists today still have an estimated armed strength of over 10,000; and the Bush Administration designated the NPA as a terrorist group in August 2002. Criminal syndicates have practiced widespread kidnappings for ransom. The target of President Arroyo’s policy, however, is Muslim insurgency and terrorism.

This report provides an overview and policy analysis of the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group in the Philippines and the Philippine-U.S. program of military cooperation against it. It examines the origins and operations of Abu Sayyaf, the efforts of the Philippine government and military to eliminate it, the implications of a greater U.S. military role in attempts to suppress it, and the implications for dealing with the broader problem of Muslim insurgency and terrorism in the Philippines. The report will be updated periodically.

¹ Landler, Mark. Philippines Offers U.S. Its Troops and Bases. *New York Times*, October 2, 2001. P. 5.

² Pazzibugan, Dona Z. RP to Open Air Space, Refueling Facilities to US. *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (Internet version), March 22, 2003. Garcia, Danilo. 700 Soldiers to be Sent to Iraq. *Pilipino Star Ngayon* (Internet version), March 29, 2003.

Historic Muslim Insurgency

Located on the big southern island of Mindanao and the Sulu island chain southwest of Mindanao, Filipino Muslims, called Moros, since the time of Spanish rule, revolted against Spanish colonizers of the Philippines from the 17th century on, the American rulers of the early 20th century, and Philippine governments since independence in 1946. From 1899 to 1914, the U.S. military conducted a number of campaigns to suppress Muslim insurgents in the southern Philippines — campaigns which were controversial because of heavy civilian casualties. Muslim grievances after 1946 focused on the growing settlement of Catholic Filipinos on Mindanao, which reduced the geographical area of a Muslim majority (there are about 7 million Filipino Muslims). Muslims revolted in the 1970s under a Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which demanded an independent Muslim state. An estimated 120,000 people were killed in the 1970s in heavy fighting between the MNLF and the Philippine armed forces (AFP).³

Since the late 1970s, there have been two trends in the Muslim problem. The first has been negotiations between the Philippine government and the MNLF. As a result, the MNLF abandoned its goal of an independent Muslim state. An agreement was reached in 1996 that created an autonomous Muslim region. This apparent positive trend was countered by the fragmentation of the Muslim movement. A segment of the MNLF broke away in 1978 and formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MILF demanded independence for Muslim populated regions and proclaimed that a Muslim state would be based on “Koranic principles.” The MILF gained strength into the 1990s. By 1995-96, U.S. estimates placed armed MILF strength at 35,000-45,000 in seven provinces on Mindanao. The MILF had large base camps and functional governmental operations. Its operations included attacks on the AFP and planting bombs in Mindanao cities. A Bangsamoro Peoples Consultative Assembly of approximately 200,000 people was held in 1996 in MILF-held territory and called for an independent Muslim state.⁴

Stepped-up MILF military operations in 1998-99 prompted Philippine President Joseph Estrada to order an all-out military offensive against MILF base camps. The AFP captured the MILF’s main base on Mindanao and damaged the MILF militarily. Since then, MILF armed strength has fallen to an estimated 13,000;⁵ but it remains the largest Muslim armed force. In 2001, Philippine government-MILF negotiations resulted in a cease-fire. The cease-fire had held, and there have been periodic peace negotiations between the government and the MILF. However, the MILF also had increased cooperation with Jeemah Islamiah, an Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group

³ Sales, Peter M. War in Mindanao. *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, October-November 2000, p. 8, 10.

⁴ Tiglao, Rigoberto. Hidden Strength; Crescent Moon Rising. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 23, 1995. P. 22-28. Tiglao, Rigoberto. Moro Reprise. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 26, 1996-January 2, 1997. P. 22.

⁵ Gomez, Jim. Philippine Muslim guerrillas agree to return to Malaysian-brokered peace talks. Associated Press, November 29, 2006.

that emerged in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States.

Abu Sayyaf: Origins, Strength, and Operations

Abubakar Janjalani, the son of a fisherman on Basilan island, formed Abu Sayyaf in 1990. Janjalani had become connected with a Muslim fundamentalist movement, Al Islamic Tabligh, in the 1980s. That organization received financial support from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, including funds to send young Muslim men to schools in the Middle East. Janjalani studied in Saudi Arabia and Libya and became radicalized. When he returned to Basilan, he recruited two groups into Abu Sayyaf (meaning “sword bearer” in Arabic): dissidents from the MNLF and Filipinos who had fought with the Afghan mujaheddin rebels against the Soviet Union.⁶

Over the next five years, Abu Sayyaf staged ambushes, bombings, kidnappings, and executions, mainly against Filipino Christians on Basilan and the west coast of Mindanao. Its strength grew only slowly to an estimated 600 by 1995.⁷ Abu Sayyaf operations declined for four years after 1995, partly as a result of the 1996 settlement between the Philippine government and the MNLF. In 1998, AFP troops killed Abubakar Janjalani. His brother, Khadaffy, and Ghalib Andang took command. Then in 2000, Abu Sayyaf began kidnapping operations aimed at foreigners, with a principle aim of extracting ransom payments. In April 2000, Abu Sayyaf forces commanded by Andang, aboard fast speed boats, attacked a tourist resort in the Malaysian state of Sabah and kidnaped 21 foreigners, including Malaysians, Frenchmen, Germans, Finns, and South Africans. In July 2000, Abu Sayyaf seized three French journalists. It released the hostages later in the year after it received ransom payments, including money reportedly from European governments funneled through the Libyan government. Estimates of the amount of this ransom range from \$10 to \$25 million.⁸

According to Philippine government officials, Abu Sayyaf used the 2000 ransom to recruit new members, raising its strength to an estimated 1,000 or more, and acquire new equipment, including communications equipment and more fast speedboats. Abu Sayyaf used speedboats again on May 27, 2000, in venturing 300 miles across the Sulu Sea to attack a tourist resort on Palawan, the Philippines’ large, westernmost island. Khadaffy Janjalani commanded the operation. Abu Sayyaf kidnaped 20 people, including three Americans. It took them to Basilan where they were held by a faction of Abu Sayyaf headed by a volatile individual, Abu Sabaya. Abu Sayyaf announced in June 2001 that it had beheaded one of the Americans, Guillermo Sobero, of Coronado, California. It continued to hold Martin and Gracia

⁶ In Mindanao, the Islamic Fundamentalist Movement Appears to be Spearheaded by the Tabligh and Abu Sayyaf. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 29, 1994. P. 1.

⁷ Richburg, Keith. Spoilers of the Peace. *Washington Post*, May 25, 1995. P. A33.

⁸ Fisk, Robert. The Double-Edged Sword of Gaddafi’s Links with the Philippines. *London Independent* (internet version), August 22, 2000. Tan, Abby. Kidnappings a Blow to Philippine Image. *Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2001. P. 7.

Burnham, Christian missionaries of Wichita, Kansas, and Deborah Yap, a Filipino nurse. Most of the other abductees from Palawan were freed after more ransom was paid, reportedly as much as \$1 million per person. Throughout 2000 and 2001, Abu Sayyaf kidnaped numerous Filipinos on Basilan and Mindanao, releasing some after ransom payments and executing others. Ex-hostages claimed Abu Sayyaf was demanding \$2 million for the Burnhams.⁹

Philippine military operations since 2001, supported by the United States, have weakened Abu Sayyaf on Basilan and in the Sulu islands. Abu Sayyaf's armed strength is estimated to have fallen from 1,000 in 2002 to 200-400 in 2006 (200 estimated by Philippine National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales).¹⁰ However, under the leadership of Khadaffy Janjalani, Abu Sayyaf reoriented its strategy and appears to have gained new effectiveness as a terrorist organization. Janjalani de-emphasized kidnappings for ransom and instead emphasized developing capabilities for urban bombings. He improved ties with key military factions of the MILF and established cooperation with JI. He also re-emphasized the Islamic nature of Abu Sayyaf. Khadaffy moved some of Abu Sayyaf's operations and leadership from the Sulu islands to the mainland of western Mindanao.

In March and April 2003, Abu Sayyaf, JI, and MILF cadre carried out bombings in Davao on Mindanao, which killed 48. Since March 2004, the Philippine government has announced that it uncovered several Abu Sayyaf plots to conduct bombings in Manila, including the discovery of explosives. One reported target was the U.S. Embassy. In April 2004, police officials reportedly determined that a February 2004 bombing of a Manila-based ferry, in which 194 people died, was the work of Abu Sayyaf and the Rajah Solaiman Movement, a group of radical Filipino Muslim converts from the Manila area. In February 2005, Abu Sayyaf carried out three simultaneous bombings in three cities, which indicated a higher level of technical and operational capabilities.

Connections to Al Qaeda and Jeemah Islamiah

The Wall Street Journal of December 3, 2001, quoted Admiral Denis Blair, Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, that "we're seeing increasing evidence that there are potential current links" between Abu Sayyaf and Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda terrorist organization. It is accepted that Abu Sayyaf received funding and support from Al Qaeda in the early 1990s. Money came from Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, a Saudi and brother-in-law of bin Laden, who operated a number of Islamic charities in the southern Philippines. Ramzi Yoesef, an Al Qaeda operative, came to the Philippines in 1994. He and other Al Qaeda operatives

⁹ Romero, Paolo. Abus Attempting a Robin Hood. *Philippine Star* (internet version), July 27, 2001. What Ransom? *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (internet version), June 18, 2001. Quezon City GMA 7 television broadcast, December 7, 2001.

¹⁰ Abuza, Jachary. Balik-Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf. Carlisle, U.S. War College, 2005. P. 27. Mogato, Manny. Fighting in the Philippine south rages, soldier killed. Reuters News, November 24, 2005. Cagoco, Josefa. Kay Mindanao areas placed on high terror alert level. Business World (Manila, internet), September 9, 2006.

reportedly trained Abu Sayyaf fighters.¹¹ Yoesuf established an Al Qaeda cell in Manila. Yoesuf used the cell to plan an assassination of Pope John Paul II, the planting of bombs aboard 12 U.S. airliners flying trans-Pacific routes, and the crashing of an airplane into the Central Intelligence Agency's headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Filipino police uncovered the cell in 1995 and provided information on the plot to the C.I.A. and F.B.I.. Yoesuf later was arrested in Pakistan and extradited to the United States for trial over his complicity in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center.¹²

Filipino officials close to President Arroyo contended that the relationship declined after 1995 when the Ramzi Yoesuf plot was uncovered and Khalifa left the Philippines, and other experts concurred with this assessment. They cited the decline in foreign financial support as a key reason for Abu Sayyaf's expanded kidnappings for ransom. However, ties strengthened beginning in 2000-2001 apparently for several reasons. First, in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States, Al Qaeda apparently decided to reconsider Abu Sayyaf as an ally against the United States. Second, in the late 1990s, Jeemah Islamiah and Al Qaeda cadre began to use MILF bases on Mindanao for training and planning operations, which brought JI into direct contact with Abu Sayyaf.¹³ Third, as stated previously, Khaddafy Janjalani reoriented Abu Sayyaf towards operations that were more in line with Al Qaeda-JI operations and thus established a stronger basis for cooperation.

A secret AFP intelligence report of early 2000 reportedly asserted that Abu Sayyaf received training, arms, and other support from Al Qaeda and other Middle East terrorist groups.¹⁴ AFP officers subsequently reported that "foreign Muslims" were training Abu Sayyaf on Mindanao to conduct urban terrorism and that Osama bin Laden had ordered stepped-up aid to Abu Sayyaf, including possibly \$3 million in 2000.¹⁵ Hostages who escaped Abu Sayyaf captivity and Abu Sayyaf defectors gave similar accounts of Middle Easterners and Afghans conducting training in Abu Sayyaf camps in 2000 and 2001.¹⁶ In 2001, Khadaffy Janjalani reportedly approached Zulkifli, a key JI operative and requested that JI train Abu Sayyaf

¹¹ Police Hunt for Sudanese Terrorist in Mindanao. *Manila Chronicle*, December 15, 1995. P. 3. Pomonti, Jean-Claude. Al Qaeda's Invisible Presence in Southeast Asia. *Le Monde*, November 4-5, 2001, p. 12.

¹² For a detailed account of the Ramzi Yousef bomb plot, see Brzezinski, Matthew. Bust and Boom. *Washington Post Magazine*, December 31, 2001. P. 15-17, 27-28.

¹³ Abuza, Zachary. *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia*. Boulder and London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003. P. 96-99, 113, 136-138.

¹⁴ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. Terrorism War's New Front. *Washington Post*, December 22, 2001. P. A1. Kurlantzick, Joshua. Muslim Separatists in Global Network of Terrorist Groups. *Washington Times*, May 2, 2000. P. A13.

¹⁵ Arquiza, Ray. Interpol Alerts RP on Bin Laden's Men. *Philippine Star* (internet version), July 10, 2001. Gomez, Jim. Philippine Rebels, bin Laden Linked. Agence France Presse report, June 20, 2000.

¹⁶ Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia*, p. 113.

members. Zulkifli agreed and dispatched JI cadre to Abu Sayyaf camps.¹⁷ By mid-2005, Jeemah Islamiah personnel reportedly had trained about 60 Abu Sayyaf cadre in bomb assembling and detonation.¹⁸ On October 2, 2002, Abu Sayyaf operatives and two Indonesian members of JI conducted a bombing in Zamboanga on Mindanao that killed three people, including a U.S. Special Forces soldier. Several joint bombing operations followed. Abu Sayyaf-JI collaboration also resulted in another important development in Abu Sayyaf's emergence after 2000 as a bona fide member of the Al Qaeda-backed Southeast Asian terrorist network: Abu Sayyaf gained access to MILF camps where JI-MILF training was ongoing, and MILF commands began to support Abu Sayyaf-JI bombings.¹⁹ More evidence of JI-Abu Sayyaf collaboration came with the reports that two Indonesian JI cadre (Umar Patek and Dulmatin), accused of the 2002 Bali bombing, were with Abu Sayyaf forces on Jolo island.

Links to the MILF

Leaders of the MILF and MNLF have denied any supportive links with Abu Sayyaf. They have criticized Abu Sayyaf's terrorist attacks against civilians. The MILF rejected the Afghan Taliban's call for a jihad against the United States and condemned the September 11 attack.²⁰ There have been many reports of links between the MILF and Al Qaeda and JI. One example is the findings of the Singapore government following the uncovering of a JI plot in December 2001 to stage multiple bombings in Singapore. Singapore officials reported in January 2002 that an MILF trainer and bomb specialist assisted the group of 13 members of Jeemah Islamiah arrested in Singapore in December 2001 for plotting to bomb U.S. and other foreign targets in Singapore.²¹ Subsequent reports in 2002, particularly of Singapore's investigation of Jeemah Islamiah, substantiated that the MILF provided key training and other assistance in recent years to members of Jeemah Islamiah.²² Jeemah Islamiah also was believed responsible for the bombing in Bali, Indonesia, in October 2002.

One of the first pieces of hard evidence of MILF cooperation with Abu Sayyaf was the bombings in Davao on Mindanao in March and April 2003, which killed

¹⁷ Abuza, Balik-Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf, p. 22.

¹⁸ Mogato, Manny. Philippine rebels linking up with foreign jihadists. Reuters News, August 21, 2005. Del Puerto, Luige A. PNP [Philippine National Police]: alliance of JI, RP terrorists strong. *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (internet version), November 20, 2005.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22-24.

²⁰ Mendez, Christina. MILF Rejects 'Holy War' vs US. *Philippine Star* (internet version), September 17, 2001.

²¹ Mydans, Seth. Suspects in Singapore Are Linked to Al Qaeda and Plans for Anti-U.S. Attacks. *New York Times*, January 12, 2002. P. A8. Marinay, Manny B. Philippine Military Bares MILF's Foreign Sources of Funds. *Manila Times* (internet version), March 27, 2002.

²² Wain, Barry and McBeth, John. A Perilous Choice for the Presidents. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 3, 2002. p. 17-20.

48.²³ Zachary Abuza, U.S. expert on Islamic terrorism in Southeast Asia, has identified four of eight MILF base commands as sites of active MILF cooperation with Abu Sayyaf and JI. He also has identified the MILF's Special Operations Group as facilitating joint training and joint operations with Abu Sayyaf. Khadaffy Janjalani and other Abu Sayyaf leaders reportedly have received sanctuary in at least one MILF base camp.²⁴

Another element in Abu Sayyaf-MILF collaboration reportedly is their relationship with the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM). Unlike Muslims of the southern Philippines, the RSM appears to be composed primarily of Filipinos from the northern Philippines, including the Manila area. It has emerged from the estimated 200,000 Filipinos who have converted to Islam since the 1970s; many of these are Filipinos who worked in the Middle East where they converted. The RSM's manpower strength is unknown, but Philippine intelligence reports indicate that it has cells throughout the main island of Luzon, including metropolitan Manila.²⁵ Abu Sayyaf apparently moved to collaborate with the RSM in order to extend its reach to Manila and other parts of the northern Philippines. A Manila bombing plot uncovered in March 2005 involved the RSM and Abu Sayyaf, according to Philippine intelligence officials. The RSM has cooperated with Abu Sayyaf in several bomb plots including the February 2004 Manila ferry bombing. The RSM also has received financial support and training from elements within the MILF. The RSM leader, Ahmed Islam Santos, underwent training in bombing in the MILF's Camp Bushra on Mindanao in December 2001.²⁶

This collaboration also suggests that key MILF commanders may not support any agreement between the MILF and the Philippine government, coming out of the post-cease-fire negotiations, that would not include outright independence for the Muslim areas of the southern Philippines. In that scenario, the MILF could split with hardline elements joining even more closely with JI and Abu Sayyaf, which would maintain a high level of terrorist operations despite a settlement agreement.

Philippine Government and AFP Policies and Operations

The basic Philippine government policy since August 2000 has been constant military pressure on Abu Sayyaf. In September 2000, President Estrada ordered the AFP to commit over 1,500 troops into Jolo (pronounced "Holo") to conduct operations against Abu Sayyaf units that had taken the foreign hostages in Malaysia. President Arroyo in 2001 ordered 4,500 AFP troops into Basilan island after Abu

²³ Abuza, *Balik-Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf*, p. 10, 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14-19-22-24.

²⁵ Top terrorism suspect falls. *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (internet version), October 27, 2005. Montlake, Simon. In Philippines, watchful eye on converts. *Christian Science Monitor*, November 28, 2005. P. 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Abuza, *Balik-Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf*, p. 35-37.

Sayyaf's hostage-taking on Palawan. In mid-2002, after the completion of the U.S.-supported AFP operation on Basilan, President Arroyo ordered more troops to Jolo Island with the aim of wiping out Abu Sayyaf in its stronghold. Since then, there has been frequent, heavy fighting on Jolo.

AFP operations have been limited by several factors. One is the mountainous, jungle terrain of the two islands pockmarked by underground caves. A second is the support civilians on Jolo and Basilan reportedly give Abu Sayyaf, although surveys of Muslims on Basilan suggested that many are disillusioned by Abu Sayyaf's violence. A third has been the limited military equipment of the AFP, including an absence of night vision and other surveillance equipment and shortages of helicopters, mortars, naval patrol craft, surveillance aircraft, and even basic necessities like military boots.²⁷ U.S. military aid has made up for some of these shortfalls of equipment. In January 2007, a major success came when the AFP killed Abu Sayyaf leader, Abu Solaiman, and identified the body of Kadaffy Janjalani, the top Abu Sayyaf leader, whom the AFP apparently killed in a battle on Jolo in September 2006.²⁸

A fourth limitation appears to have been the unevenness in the quality of the AFP. The apparent attrition of Abu Sayyaf strength in 2002 and afterwards reflected AFP successes. However, the fighting on Jolo from 2002 through 2005 appears to have been a stalemate. There also have been reports of corruption within the AFP which have produced failed operations. The most controversial was the failed encirclement of the Abu Sayyaf unit holding the Burnhams and Filipino hostages in a church in the town of Lamitan in June 2001. Several AFP units pulled out of their positions without explanation, allowing the Abu Sayyaf unit to break out of the encirclement. A Catholic priest and other witnesses charged that Abu Sayyaf had bribed AFP commanders to pull units from their positions, and Filipino Catholic bishops called for an inquiry.²⁹ A Philippine Senate Committee prepared a report in August 2002 citing "strong circumstantial evidence" that AFP commanders at Lamitan had colluded with Abu Sayyaf. In her book about her captivity, Gracia Burnham described Abu Sayaf bribery of Filipino military officials and Abu Sayyaf payoffs to AFP personnel in return for military supplies.³⁰

A fifth limitation was the hostage situations. In 2000, European governments reportedly pressured the Philippine government to refrain from "excessive" military operations while Abu Sayyaf held the European hostages. In 2002, there reportedly

²⁷ Mogato, Manny. Philippine military ill-equipped to fight — report. Reuters News, October 31, 2003. Mogato, Manny. Fuel costs, lack of bullets hurt Manila terror war. Reuters News, November 14, 2005.

²⁸ Hookway, James. Terrorist cells band together in Philippines. *Wall Street Journal Asia*, January 22, 2007. p. 11. DNA test confirms death of Philippine separatist leader. *New York Times*, January 21, 2007. p. 3.

²⁹ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. Rebels' Escape Draws Scrutiny. *Washington Post*, September 1, 2001, p. A 18.

³⁰ Mogato, Manny. Former U.S. hostage testifies in Philippines. Reuters News, July 29, 2004.

was similar U.S. pressure regarding the Burnhams. Arroyo Administration officials and AFP commanders said they were restrained from air bombing and using artillery and mortars out of concern for the safety of the hostages. A sixth limitation was the AFP deployment of most of its forces in the southern Philippines in the broader areas of Mindanao dominated by the MILF and MNLF. Only a small percentage of Filipino troops was committed against Abu Sayyaf. A final constraint was the danger of AFP operations producing a large numbers of civilian casualties or displaced civilians. The Estrada Administration came under criticism in 2000 over reports that the AFP offensive on Jolo caused civilian casualties and displacement among the island's 600,000 residents.

The collaboration of Abu Sayyaf with the MILF and JI also appears to be placing limitations on Philippine operations against Abu Sayyaf. Abu Sayyaf undoubtedly has taken advantage of the truce between the MILF and the Philippine government to establish links with the MILF and JI and gain access to MILF base camps for training and sanctuary. The cease-fire has resulted in a substantial reduction in violence and armed clashes. However, the truce apparently has not reduced the movement of JI terrorist personnel and materials between Mindanao and the Indonesian island of Sulawesi under the direction of JI, nor has it prevented JI's growing collaboration with Abu Sayyaf.

Negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF have been protracted and inconclusive. Government predictions of an agreement in 2006 were not realized. Substantial issues and disagreements between the two sides remain to be resolved. One is the issue of "ancestral domain," the size and geographical configuration of an autonomous Muslim entity. The MILF has proposed a unified area geographically, including some non-Muslim locales. The government has proposed a smaller, "leopard spot" configuration with no geographical unity. The MILF has rejected a government proposal for a census and plebiscite in locales to determine whether they would be included in the Muslim autonomous entity. Another issue is the constitutional-political system in an autonomous Muslim entity: whether an electoral democracy or a traditional system led by Muslim religious and tribal leaders. The nature of security forces remain to be resolved, including the jurisdiction of the AFP and the Philippine National Police (PNP) in the Muslim entity. The MILF also seeks agreement on a referendum to be held at some point to determine the final political status of the Muslim entity; such a plebiscite could include an option for full independence. The future role of the MNLF and other non-MILF groups also is a point in dispute between the MILF and the MNLF.³¹

The 2002 Balikatan Operation

Beginning in October 2001, the United States sent groups of military observers to Mindanao to assess AFP operations against Abu Sayyaf, render advice, and examine AFP equipment needs. President Bush extended \$93 million in military aid

³¹ Abuza, Zachary. Status of the GRP-MILF talks. January 14, 2007. 5 pages. Arguillas, Carolyn O. Will new proposal break the impasse? MindaNews (internet), November 15, 2006.

to the Philippines when President Arroyo visited Washington in November 2001, and he offered a direct U.S. military role in combating Abu Sayyaf. President Arroyo insisted that the U.S. military role should be advisory and that the AFP would retain full operational responsibility. By late December 2001, the AFP on Mindanao began to receive quantities of U.S. military equipment. Moreover, AFP commanders suggested that they would support President Arroyo if she sought a more direct U.S. military role.³²

The early proposals of the Bush Administration envisaged a large, direct, and assertive role for U.S. forces: a direct combat role for U.S. military personnel, the commitment of the elite Delta Force to lead operations to rescue the Burnhams,³³ and assistance to the AFP against Abu Sayyaf.³⁴ However, negotiations with the Philippines over the rules of engagement for the Balikatan exercise resulted in a more limited U.S. role, as Filipino officials insisted on a non-combat role for the Americans, operations against only Abu Sayyaf, and a geographical limitation of U.S. operations to only Basilan island and the Zamboanga peninsula.

In February 2002, the United States dispatched 1,300 U.S. troops to provide training, advice, and other non-combat assistance to 1,200 Filipino troops against Abu Sayyaf on Basilan island in an operation dubbed “Balikatan” (shoulder-to-shoulder). The U.S. troops included 160 Special Operations personnel and over 300 troops, primarily Navy engineers, to undertake “civic action” projects such as road-building on Basilan.

Philippine-U.S. rules of engagement provided that two-man U.S. Special Forces teams could accompany AFP companies in the field on Basilan island. U.S. military officials in the Philippines reportedly favored an early implementation of this plan; but some Bush Administration officials in Washington, including Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, developed second thoughts about this U.S. role.³⁵ Rumsfeld did not detail these misgivings, but several have been reported and/or seem apparent. Command arrangements were a difficult issue in Philippine-U.S. negotiations over rules of engagement. The Americans refused to place U.S. personnel under Filipino command but agreed that U.S. personnel would take “operational instructions from Filipino commanders” in the field. Rumsfeld and other officials, however, may have had continued doubts about this kind of arrangement. Relatedly, the uneven and sometimes poor quality of AFP units may have added to these doubts.

³² More US ‘Advisors’ to Help Fight Sayyaf. *Manila Times*, January 4, 2002. P. 1. Ng-Gadil, Mirasol. AFP Admitted that Operation Against Abu Sayyuf Bandits is Difficult. *Manila Kabayan* (internet version), December 30, 2001.

³³ Bonner, Raymond. Philippines Terror Group Seeks Money for Couple. *New York Times*, March 9, 2002. p. A10.

³⁴ Struck, Doug. Some Filipinos Cite Threats Beyond Abu Sayyaf. *Washington Post*, March 4, 2002. p. A13.

³⁵ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. U.S. Troops Have yet to Join Patrols in Philippines. *Washington Post*, May 1, 2002. p. A16.

In mid-June 2002, the Filipinos and Americans finalized arrangements for U.S. Special Forces in the field. U.S. Special Forces personnel would accompany only selected AFP companies that had reached certain specified combat skills and on only closely defined missions. Moreover, this arrangement would end on July 31, 2002, the official termination date of the Balikatan operation. Any extension would have to be re-negotiated.³⁶ In reality, the arrangements were not implemented before the July 31 deadline.

U.S. policy toward the Burnhams, the American missionary couple held hostage, contained several shifts. After the U.S. offer of the Delta Force was ruled out, American officials reportedly advised their Filipino counterparts to exercise military restraint in order to limit the danger to the Burnhams.³⁷ The Bush Administration made a decision, probably in March 2002, to support the payment of ransom to Abu Sayyaf. The payment of \$300,000 reportedly was made by private parties, probably through intermediaries that had contacts with Abu Sayyaf. U.S. FBI officials reportedly helped to deliver the money in April 2002. Abu Sayyaf did not release the Burnhams. The money reportedly did not go to the Abu Sayyaf group under Abu Sabaya which held the hostages. Instead, it went to the Jolo-based Abu Sayyaf faction under Khaddafy Janjalani, who reportedly refused to turn it over to Abu Sabaya.³⁸ The Bush Administration has not disclosed what went wrong with the ransom attempt.

Following the failed ransom attempt, U.S. officials reportedly shifted from their pro-restraint position and advised the AFP to adopt more aggressive tactics to rescue the Burnhams. The U.S. military provided the AFP with intelligence information that Abu Sayyaf moved the Burnhams from Basilan to the Zamboanga peninsula in April 2002 and with key intelligence in the AFP's assault on the Abu Sayyaf team holding the hostages on June 7, 2002. Martin Burnham and Filipino hostage, Deborah Yap, were killed during the fighting; Gracia Burnham was rescued.

Despite these changes in the U.S. military role and in U.S. policies and the less than successful attempt to rescue the Burnhams, the Balikatan exercise appears to have accomplished several U.S. goals. Philippine-U.S. security cooperation was advanced. AFP commanders viewed the U.S. role in Balikatan positively, and President Arroyo continued to advocate this kind of cooperation. Most reports indicate that U.S. support enhanced the capabilities of AFP units on Basilan. The period after February 2002 saw more assertive AFP patrolling on Basilan, more encounters with Abu Sayyaf, and an erosion of Abu Sayyaf strength, which apparently led to the Abu Sayyaf decision to leave Basilan with the Burnhams. In March 2003, Philippine officials estimated Abu Sayyaf strength at about 470 with

³⁶ Schmitt, Eric. American Troops Will Begin Tighter Operations with Filipinos. *New York Times*, June 20, 2002. p. A13.

³⁷ Ricks, Thomas E. and Sipress, Alan. Spy Planes Seek out Philippine guerrillas. *Washington Post*, February 21, 2002. p. A1.

³⁸ Lerner, Mark. Hostage's Father Says Abu Sayyaf Broke Deal. *Washington Times*, April 26, 2002. p. A15. Bonner, Raymond and Schmitt, Eric. Philippine Officials Detail the Trap, Set With U.S. Help, that Snared a Rebel Leader. *New York Times*, September 22, 2002, p. 16.

about 380 on Jolo Island. As stated previously, later estimates placed Abu Sayyaf strength between 200 and 400 fighters. Filipino officials voiced praise for the modern equipment U.S. forces provided the AFP, U.S. intelligence information provided by U.S. aircraft and sophisticated communications and tracking equipment, and American assistance in planning operations.³⁹ U.S. equipment and surveillance were important in the AFP's successful operation later in June 2002 in intercepting Abu Sabaya and other Abu Sayyaf leaders at sea in which Abu Sabaya was killed.⁴⁰

The Bush Administration's initiative in offering 350 U.S. personnel to conduct civic action projects on Basilan reportedly proved popular with the people on the island and probably helped to neutralize public support for Abu Sayyaf on the island.⁴¹ The civic action projects (road building, medical care, and well-digging) may have influenced a less negative reaction of Filipino Muslims elsewhere to the U.S. military role, and the favorable Filipino media coverage appears to have helped President Arroyo contain the critics of the United States within the Manila political elite.

U.S. Support Role on Jolo Island and in Western Mindanao

A key decision for post-July 31 cooperation was whether to extend the U.S. support and assistance role southward from Basilan to Jolo and other islands in the Sulu group where Abu Sayyaf continued to operate. There was evidence of tough Philippine-U.S. negotiations on this issue and possible division within the American side. President Arroyo and Secretary of Defense Angelo Reyes voiced support for a U.S. assistance role in the Sulus.⁴²

The continued Abu Sayyaf bombings in autumn 2002 led the U.S. Defense Department to give increased attention to Jolo. U.S. officials also cited stronger evidence of connections between Abu Sayyaf and international terrorist groups. Planning and discussions with the Philippine government were underway by December 2002. In February 2003, Pentagon officials described a plan under which the United States would commit 350 Special Operations Forces (SOF) to Jolo to operate with AFP Army and Marine units down to the platoon level of 20-30 troops. Another 400 U.S. support troops would be at Zamboanga on the Mindanao mainland. Positioned offshore of Jolo would be a navy task force of 1,000 U.S. Marines and 1,300 Navy personnel equipped with Cobra attack helicopters and Harrier jets.⁴³

³⁹ Gloria, Glenda M. Training Days. *Manila Newsbreak* (internet version), July 8, 2002.

⁴⁰ Bonner and Schmitt, Philippine Officials Detail the Trap, Set With U.S. Help, that Snared a Rebel Leader, *New York Times*, September 22, 2002, 16.

⁴¹ Schmitt, Eric. By Aiding Needy Filipinos, G.I.'s Could Help Rout the Rebels. *New York Times*, June 15, 2002. p. A6.

⁴² Vuillanueva, Mirichu and Pareno, Roel. Arroyo Scolds US General. *Philippine Star* (internet version), July 11, 2002. New US-Philippine Exercises Against Rebels Planned. Reuters News Agency, July 20, 2002.

⁴³ Graham, Bradley. U.S. Bolsters Philippine Force. *Washington Post*, February 21, 2003. p. A1.

According to the Pentagon description of the plan, U.S. troops would be in a combat role. This and subsequent statements indicated that the SOF on Jolo would participate in AFP offensive operations against Abu Sayyaf and that the SOF would not be limited to using their weapons for self-defense. The U.S. Marines were described as a “quick reaction” force, undoubtedly meaning that they could be sent on to Jolo to reinforce AFP units. The Cobra helicopters and Harrier jets would give AFP commanders the option of requesting U.S. air strikes in support of AFP operations.

These rules of engagement went beyond the U.S. role on Basilan in 2002. President Arroyo and AFP commanders reportedly had agreed to the plan in a meeting of February 4, 2003.⁴⁴ The announcement of the plan caused immediate controversy in the Philippines. Filipino politicians and media organs criticized the plan as violating the constitutional prohibition of foreign troops engaging in combat on Philippine soil.⁴⁵ Filipino Muslim leaders warned of a Muslim backlash on Mindanao. Filipino experts and civic leaders on Jolo warned that the people of Jolo would not support a U.S. combat role, partly because of the history of U.S. military involvement on the island. During the Philippine wars following the U.S. annexation of the Philippines in 1898, U.S. forces commanded by Generals Leonard Wood and John J. Pershing conducted extensive combat operations against Muslim forces on Jolo, inflicting thousands of civilian casualties. President Arroyo reacted to these criticisms and warnings by asserting that the U.S. role on Jolo would be to train and advise under AFP jurisdiction but would not involve combat. The Bush and Arroyo administrations decided to put the plan on hold and re-negotiate the rules of engagement of U.S. forces. It was reported that President Arroyo decided to postpone implementation of any plan until after the U.S. war with Iraq.⁴⁶

However, after 2002, the United States and the Philippines implemented another phase of U.S. training and support of the AFP, the training of AFP light infantry companies for use against both Muslim insurgents and the communist New People’s Army. In 2004, the two sides began to negotiate alternative schemes for military cooperation against Abu Sayyaf. The result was two operations that began in 2005 and continue to the present. One has focused on Abu Sayyaf on western Mindanao, undoubtedly in response to Khadaffy Janjalani’s shift of Abu Sayyaf operations to the Mindanao mainland. The second focused on Jolo but with a reduced U.S. military role as compared to the plan of 2003.

The operations apparently have had three objectives: (1) neutralize Abu Sayyaf-Jeemah Islamiah training; (2) kill or capture Khaddafy Janjalani and other Abu Sayyaf leaders (partially successful with the deaths of Janjalani and Solaiman); and

⁴⁴ Nakashima, Ellen and Graham, Bradley. Missed Signals Forced Suspension of U.S.-Philippine Mission. *Washington Post*, March 3, 2003. p. A12.

⁴⁵ Nakashima, Ellen. Philippines Debates U.S. Combat Role Against Rebels. *Washington Post*, February 23, 2003. p. A30.

⁴⁶ Pareno, Roel and Mendez, Christina. Reyes: RP-US Balikatan Deal Done in One Month. *Philippine Star* (Internet version), March 28, 2003. Villanueva, Marichu. More Conservative Terms for Balikatan 03-1 Sought. *Philippine Star* (Internet version), March 23, 2003.

(3) root out the Abu Sayyaf forces and organization on Jolo in a similar fashion to the success on Basilan in 2002. The U.S. military role in western Mindanao reportedly has involved intelligence and communications support of the AFP, including the employment of U.S. P-3 surveillance aircraft; deployment of Navy Seal and Special Operations personnel with AFP ground units; and rules of engagement restricting U.S. personnel to a non-combat role (although such rules normally would allow U.S. personnel to defend themselves if attacked).⁴⁷ In November 2005, U.S. troops were deployed into Jolo to assist the AFP in mine clearing,⁴⁸ and the AFP announced a joint Philippine-U.S. military exercise in the Sulu islands scheduled for February 20-March 5, 2006. In this exercise, dubbed Balikatan Shoulder-to-Shoulder 2006, about 5,500 U.S. military personnel participated. Of these, 250 conducted non-combat exercises on Jolo with emphasis on civic action projects such as medical services, repairing roads and bridges, and repairing school buildings.⁴⁹ The exercise carried over into a longer-term U.S. support operation in Jolo and reportedly has expanded to include assistance to the AFP in planning operations and intelligence collection and surveillance.⁵⁰

Implications of U.S. Military Involvement

Philippine-U.S. military cooperation against Abu Sayyaf has rebuilt a Philippine-U.S. alliance that had weakened considerably after the Philippines ended U.S. rights to military bases in the Philippines in 1993. During President Arroyo's state visit to Washington in May 2003, the Bush Administration designated the Philippines as a Major Non-NATO ally, a status that could make the Philippines eligible to receive more sophisticated U.S. arms and military training. The joint operations and exercises appear to have strong support from the Filipino populace. They served to limit the potential rift between Manila and Washington in 2004 when President Arroyo withdrew the small AFP contingent from Iraq in response to the taking of a Filipino contract worker hostage by insurgents in Iraq. However, the enlarged U.S. military role also carries the risk of political backlashes. Influential Filipino "nationalist" and leftist groups criticized the U.S. military role in Basilan, even though polls indicated overwhelming Filipino public support for it and the influential Catholic Bishops Conference endorsed it. They charged that the U.S. military role violated the Philippine constitution and that the United States was plotting to secure permanent military bases again. This kind of controversy likely will emerge again if the new U.S. military role on Jolo is prolonged and/or expands in scope.

Moreover, incidents involving U.S. military personnel and Filipino civilians have the potential to turn Filipino opinion negative toward the United States. At the

⁴⁷ Bonner, Raymond and Conde, Carlos H. U.S. and Philippines join forces to pursue terrorist leader. *New York Times*, July 23, 2005. P. A4.

⁴⁸ U.S. troops remove landmines in Philippine south. Reuters News, December 1, 2005.

⁴⁹ U.S. plans Philippine war games in Muslim south. Reuters News, January 10, 2006. Asia Security Monitor No. 151, January 9, 2006.

⁵⁰ U.S. troops fighting in Philippines? Associated Press, January 16, 2007.

end of 2005, four U.S. Marines, stationed on Okinawa, were charged formally with raping a Filipino woman while they were in the Philippines for a military exercises. Their case is pending and is drawing much publicity in the Philippines, particularly over the application of the 1998 Philippine-U.S. Visiting Forces Agreement to the case and especially to the issue of who will hold custody of the Marines until their trial is held.

The U.S. military undoubtedly will be influenced by the increasingly complex Muslim terrorist and insurgency situation that has developed since 2002. As stated previously, Abu Sayyaf's armed strength has dwindled to an estimated 200-400. The cease-fire between the MILF and the Philippine government has held, and negotiations for a settlement are ongoing in Malaysia. However, there are other developments of a negative nature that could worsen the overall situation in the southern Philippines and even the Philippines as a whole. One is the growing cooperation among Abu Sayyaf, several major MILF commands, and elements of Jeemah Islamiah on Mindanao. JI appears to use Mindanao as a primary base for building up its cadre of terrorists. This cooperation among the three groups appears to be transforming Mindanao into a significant base of operations rather than just a site for training; and these operations appear to target increasingly the Philippines for terrorist attacks rather than just neighboring countries. This, too, is related to the emergence of the Rajah Solaiman Movement and its cooperation with Abu Sayyaf and JI. The result has been an increase in terrorist bombings since 2002 both in number and destructiveness and an increase in the number of bombings and bomb plots in the northern Philippines, including Manila.

The Bush Administration has expressed growing concern over MILF links with JI and Abu Sayyaf and JI's use of the Mindanao-Sulawesi corridor to move terrorists and bombing materials between the Philippines and Indonesia. In April 2005, the U.S. Charge d'Affaires in Manila, Joseph Mussomeli, caused an uproar among Filipino officials when he stated that parts of Muslim Mindanao, with its poverty, lawlessness, porous borders, and links to JI could development into an "Afghanistan-style" situation. In May 2005, U.S. Ambassador Francis Ricciardone announced the cancellation of a U.S.-aided road project in Cotabato province in southern Mindanao, describing Cotabato as a "doormat" for Muslim terrorists.⁵¹ These statements indicated U.S. dissatisfaction with the situation on Mindanao and doubts about the Philippine government's ability to end Muslim terrorism.

The Bush Administration has considered placing the MILF on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations. However, the Arroyo Administration has opposed such a move as potentially jeopardizing the peace negotiations.⁵² As of the beginning of 2006, the Bush Administration has voiced support for the Philippine-MILF peace

⁵¹ Conde, Carlos H. Corruption troubles Philippine military. *International Herald Tribune*, May 26, 2005.

⁵² Abuza, Balik-Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf, p. 42. Gloria's powers of persuasion. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 12, 2002. P. 10.

negotiations as the best means of de-linking the MILF from JI and Abu Sayyaf.⁵³ This support boosts the Arroyo Administration against the AFP's advocacy of a militarily-aggressive strategy toward the MILF. Nevertheless, the new U.S. military role in western Mindanao increases the risk of a clash involving U.S. military personnel with the MILF. In January 2006, 60 U.S. military personnel conducted training for several hundred AFP personnel near Cotobato City in the heart of MILF territory. The U.S. contingent also was to carry out civic action projects (medical, dental, and veterinary services) in nearby Muslim villages. The U.S. military presence drew a protest march by Muslim civilian groups allied with the MILF and a warning from an MILF central committee official over the increasing presence of U.S. military forces in the Muslim areas of Mindanao.⁵⁴

Moreover, a breakdown of the negotiations and the cease-fire likely would confront the Bush Administration with policy decisions regarding a U.S. role in a wider war. The AFP could be expected to propose increased supplies of U.S. arms and military equipment; and it likely would argue for a more direct U.S. military role. The Philippine government might change its previous policy of opposition to a U.S. military role against the MILF and encourage U.S. actions against the MILF at least in a role similar to that in the joint operations against Abu Sayyaf.

If significant elements of the MILF opposed a peace agreement and moved closer to JI and Abu Sayyaf, and if they were able to continue or expand terrorist operations, the Bush Administration would be faced with a different kind of challenge but one that could include similar pressures for greater U.S. military involvement. That, too, would be the case if a peace agreement were not followed by effective measures against JI on Mindanao. There also would be the challenge of proceeding with implementing projects financed by \$260 million in U.S. aid to Mindanao since 2001 (including \$25 million in FY2006). This commitment, too, could confront the Administration with a policy decision of whether or not to employ U.S. pressure on the Philippine government to implement faithfully its obligations under a peace agreement. This scenario is plausible, given the reputed poor performance of Philippine governments in implementing the 1977 and 1996 agreements with the MNLF.

⁵³ Asia Security Monitor No. 147, November 2005. U.S. says peace deal in Manila may pressure JI. Reuters News, October 22, 2005.

⁵⁴ Mogato, Manny. Philippine army on alert as US forces begin drills. Reuters News, January 16, 2006. Mogato, Manny. Interview — Philippine rebels see peace talks as done deal. Reuters News, January 16, 2006. Mogato, Manny. Protest greets U.S. troops training in Philippines. Reuters News, January 17, 2006.