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ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES IN COUNTER-TERRORISM IN THE PHILIPPINES SEVEN YEARS AFTER 9/11 *

By

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I just arrived from an official trip in Australia where I had the rare privilege as an Observer, together with 50 other participants from 22 countries, of Australia's Multi-Jurisdictional Counter-Terrorism Exercise code-named Mercury 08. The aim of this exercise was to test Australia's preparedness in the event a terrorist act occurs in any part of their country.

Before anything else, I would like to express my sincerest congratulations to the PIPVTR, a pioneering think-tank on terrorism research and studies in the Philippines, for organizing this event. Indeed, we need this forum to discuss the many ramifications of terrorism as it affects our daily lives, whether we are in business, media, government, or in any sector of Philippine society.

My topic for today is entitled "Achievements and Challenges in Counter-Terrorism in the Philippines Seven Years After 9/11." I will also share with you the lessons I learned during my brief stay in Australia.

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My presentation is divided into three major parts. First, the current terrorist situation in the Philippines in the context of terrorist threats confronting Southeast Asia, which is described by many analysts and experts as the “second front” in the global campaign against terrorism; second, our achievements in counter-terrorism in the Philippines, and lastly, I will identify challenges in countering terrorism in the Philippines.

Terrorist Threats in the Philippines: The Southeast Asian Connection

Though terrorism in the Philippines has indigenous origins and causes, the threat of terrorism in the country can be best understood in the context of the situation in Southeast Asia. This is because terrorist threats in the Philippines are inextricably linked with the general terrorist situation in the region.

Southeast Asia is heavily prone to the activities of indigenous and international terrorist groups. Major terrorist threats are attributed to the activities of Al Jemaah al Islamiyah (popularly known as Jemaah Islamiya or JI) and the complex web of linkages among violent extremist groups in the region. Although these groups do not necessarily share the same goals and religious motivations, their linkages across national boundaries create an effective economy of scale for logistics, training, knowledge sharing and safe haven.

JI has gained international notoriety as the main source of terrorist threats in Southeast Asia. With its vision to create a pan-Islamic caliphate in the region, JI has established presence in the Philippines.

For the JI, training plays a vital role in the enhancement of the movement’s strength and capability. As part of its long-term strategy to produce new leaders, the JI established a military academy in Sada, Pakistan, on the Afghan border in 1991. This academy was disbanded in 1992 but another camp was put up in Torkham, Afghanistan. When this was closed down in 1994, the JI searched for a new training site. At that time, then MILF Chairman, Hashim Salamat, owing to his international Islamist ties, reportedly opened the door of its camps in the Southern Philippines.

The Southern Philippines continues to be the main areas of operations of two local extremist groups—rogue elements of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

In March and June 2007, Indonesian authorities arrested the JI’s emir, **Zarkasih @ Mbah** and the head of JI’s military wing, **Abu Dujana**. Based on their revelations as well as documents seized the following conclusions have been deduced:

- JI has an estimated core of approximately 900 members operating in Indonesia. While presently not growing in size, the JI retains deep roots in Indonesia and still aspires to the long term goal of establishing a unified Islamic state. This extends from Southern Thailand, through the Malay Peninsula including Singapore, across the Indonesian archipelago and into the southern Philippines.
- The JI is in a rebuilding and consolidation phase to overcome the major losses it has suffered and is unlikely unable to conduct large-scale terrorist operations such as the Bali bombings.

In his assessment of the terrorist situation in Southeast Asia, Bill Paterson, Australian Ambassador for Counter-Terrorism stated “the JI and like-minded groups have shown capacity for resilience in the face of successful counter-terrorism efforts against them in recent years:

- Over 400 individuals have been arrested in Indonesia and nearly 200 prosecuted and 160 detained following the Bali bombing in 2002.”

There are still foreign military jihadists (FMJs) operating in Mindanao. At present, authorities are focused on foreign high value targets such as **Dulmatin, Omar Patek**. At this time, however, the actual number of FMJs presently in Mindanao cannot be ascertained owing in part to two major factors:

- Most of those who were left behind the area after attending training courses are no longer visible in the intelligence radar screen (they may have married locals and absorbed in the social mainstream, among other reasons); and,
- Revelations by various arrested personalities indicate conflicting accounts of numbers.

Another major source of concern is the intelligence report indicating that foreign jihadists, believed to be associated with the group of **Omar Patek**, continue to arrive intermittently in Mindanao despite the arrest of several terrorists in Indonesia as well as the intensified border control between neighboring countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, **Omar Patek**.

An area of ongoing concern is the potential for terrorists to use chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapons in an attack. The potential

consequences of a terrorist attack using CBRN even the psychological impact of the threat of such an attack would be serious if ever it takes place. To date however, no such plan or intention has been monitored in the country. Nevertheless, there is a need to take steps to prevent it under measures such as the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism.

Achievements in Counter-Terrorism in the Philippines

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon in the Philippines – it predated 9/11. Toward this end and to ensure a holistic response to the terrorist threat, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo laid down a 16-point National Counter-Terrorism Program in 2005 as follows:

1. Organization of the whole counter-terrorism enterprise and the delineation of clear areas of responsibility and accountability.
2. Efficient and effective anticipation of events through intelligence and intelligence fusion.
3. Strengthening of the country's focus on terrorism.
4. Cleaning of the government of terrorist and criminal coddlers,
5. Holding accountable all private groups abetting or aiding terrorism.
6. Synchronization of internal efforts with the global efforts.
7. Combining a policy of tactical counterforce with the set of strategic legal measures.
8. Strengthening of the peace process to isolate terrorist groups from the moderates.
9. Pursuit of broader inter-faith dialogues to promote Christian-Muslim solidarity.
10. Recognition of the political, social and economic underpinnings of terrorism.

11. Exercise of the strictest vigilance among all law enforcement agencies and local government units, particularly against the movements of suspected persons, firearms, explosives, raw materials of explosives, toxic materials and biological materials.

12. Close coordination of preparations and actions in the event of catastrophic terrorist attacks, even if they should be remote.

13. Comprehensive security plan for critical infrastructure including power plants, power transmission and distribution facilities, oil and gas depots, key public works infrastructures, vital communication facilities, public and private buildings and facilities in the nerve center of commerce and industry.

14. Protection of security, welfare and interest of overseas Filipino workers.

15. Continued modernization of the AFP and the PNP.

16. Media support in the implementation of policies and programs, in enlightening the public of the rationale behind their actions, and in promoting consensus and even constructive criticism.

To ensure a holistic response against terrorism, the PNP, which more often than not acts as the first responder against terrorism, has adopted a three-tiered defense system namely: **intelligence, target hardening and incident management**.

- The **intelligence phase** adopts a dual approach: the broad and the focused approaches. The broad approach employs the local government executives and community leaders in partnership with local police forces. This is most valuable in proactive measures like identifying potential targets, reporting suspicious or unusual movements of persons and material.
- The **target hardening phase** is aimed at making it difficult for the terrorist to succeed in hitting their targets. Once the potential terrorist target is identified, government agencies, the private sector as well as the community work closely together to set up a security umbrella.
- In the **incident management phase** the sequence of actions to be undertaken in case of terrorist attack is determined in order to mitigate the effects of attacks and return to normalcy. In like manner, this involves partnership

among the security forces, local governments and the community. The local governments on this aspect take the lead role.

A significant milestone in the country's war against terrorism is the passage of Republic Act 9372 otherwise known as the "Human security Act of 2007". The HSA is a law that Philippine Congress enacted "to protect life liberty and property from acts of terrorism, to condemn terrorism as inimical and dangerous to the national security of the country and to the welfare of the people, and to make terrorism a crime against the Filipino people, against humanity, and against the law of nations. The law underscores the protection of the basic rights and fundamental liberties of the people as enshrined in the Philippine Constitution.

The HSA calls for a comprehensive approach comprising political, economic, diplomatic, military and legal means, duly taking into account the root causes of terrorism without acknowledging these as justifications for terrorist and/or criminal activities. Such measures shall include conflict management and post-conflict peace-building, addressing the roots of conflict by building state capacity and promoting equitable economic development.

With the HSA in place, the anti-Terrorism Council or ATC was created to effectively implement Anti-Terrorism efforts in the country and ensure the needed inter-agency convergence of efforts.

The Council is a collegial body composed of the Executive Secretary as Chairperson, the Secretary of Justice as Vice Chairperson, with the following as members: Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Secretary of National Defense, Secretary of the Interior and Local Government, and the National Security Adviser.

To carry out its functions, three (3) offices were organized namely; the Secretariat, the NACTAG or National Counter-Terrorism Action Group, and the Office of the Spokesperson. The following serve as support agencies of the Council:

- National Intelligence Coordinating Agency
- National Bureau of Investigation
- Bureau of Immigration
- Office of Civil Defense
- Armed forces of the Philippines

- Philippine National Police
- Anti-Money Laundering Council
- Philippine Center on Transnational Crimes

In its barely one year of existence, the ATC has taken initiatives to strengthen its mechanisms particularly its legal framework and inter-agency coordination. Among the significant plans and countermeasures it has undertaken are as follows:

- Requested the Court of Appeals to issue judicial authorizations and the Regional Trial Courts to handle terrorism-related cases;
- Strengthened border and immigration security through bilateral agreements and acted as oversight to the Philippine Border Management Project and the Coast Watch South Project;
- Developed a Transportation Anti-Terrorism Security Plan;
- Developed a security plan against CBRN Terrorism, and
- Prepared proposed congressional amendments to the Human Security Act.

As part of its counter-terrorism measures, the Philippine government also entered into bilateral and multilateral arrangements with other nations. These are:

Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on Border Cooperation between the Royal Malaysia Police and the Philippine National Police signed on 14 December 1996. The MOA tackled border crossing issues and joint anti-crime projects.

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Philippine Law Enforcement Community (LEC) and the Australian Federal Police (AFP). Formalized on 14 July 2003 that enabled both parties to cooperate fully on issues related to transnational crimes. The Australian government has embarked on a three-year counter-terrorism capacity building for the Philippine government law-enforcement authorities.

Case Management and Intelligence System: This is part of the RP-Australia Counter-Terrorism Capacity Building Project. The CMIS is a completely integrated data base system which has the capability to store and manage criminal and terrorism related cases. The system interconnects subordinate units of the PNP as well as the Philippine Center on Transnational Crime (PCTC) and NBI.

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in Preventing and Combating Transnational Crimes between the Indonesian National Police and the Philippine National Police

signed on 18 November 2005. The forms of cooperation include: 1) Exchange of intelligence information and documents, 2) Coordinated police activities, 3) Capacity building.

Philippine Bomb Data Center: This multi-million facility was established with the support of the Australian government to provide the PNP and other law-enforcers with the necessary technical expertise in the investigation of bomb blasts and related incidents. It maintains a data bank of all post blast investigation reports, technical data, photographs and other pertinent documents. The center also operates a research and development center and conducts training and other skills and competency building activities.

PNP Forensic Explosives Laboratory: To complement and support the efforts of the Philippine Bomb Data Center, the capability of the PNP Crime Laboratory was enhanced with the donation from Australia and Japan of forensic equipment for explosives testing. The unit now has a special laboratory dedicated to chemical analysis of explosive materials among others.

The Philippine government remains fully committed to international conventions and initiatives against terrorism and participates in endeavors designed to strengthen international cooperation in order to reduce the vulnerability of individuals and institutions to terrorist acts. Specifically, it is involved in information sharing, tightening of immigration and border control and combating terrorist financing. Through the ATC, the Rahaj Solaiman Movement or RSM and eight (8) of its members were included in the United Nations Security Council 1267 Sanctions List.

Seven years after 9/11, the Philippine government, through its holistic approach to counter-terrorism has been able to reduce the strengths and firearms of terrorist groups. The strength of the Abu Sayaff Group has been reduced from 800 in 2001 to 383 in 2007. On the Rahaj Solaiman Group, Philippine authorities have already arrested key leaders particularly Ahmad Santos and Redento Cain Dellosa among others. The most recent arrest of an RSM leader took place in Bahrain on 24 July 2008 in the person of Ruben P. Lavilla.

Challenges in Counter-Terrorism

The key premise to the country's counter-terrorism program is that no country can combat terrorism on its own. Thus, we have shown you how we have faced the challenge of terrorism by fostering cooperation with other countries, operational collaboration between and among government agencies, local government units, NGOs and the community, and the capacity-building efforts of our law-enforcers and other government instrumentalities involved in the campaign.

Be that as it may, much remains to be done in the campaign against terrorism, notwithstanding the proactive measures and achievements in the seven years after 9/11.

There is a need for a more effective implementation of our border procedures especially in southern Philippines, through coordinated border patrols and exchange of information in order to constrict the movement of human and financial resources associated with terror activities

There is a need to amend certain provisions of the Human Security Act for a more effective campaign against terrorism.

There is a need to enhance measures to counter extremist messages that may lead people to either become terrorists or support the activities of terrorists. We recognize that the appeal of terrorist groups is often enhanced by a sense of historical injustice or underdevelopment but these can never justify acts of terrorism. Hence, these factors need to be addressed.

Conclusion

Seven years after 9/11, the threat of terrorism still persists. Terrorists are highly adaptable and present us with both strategic and tactical challenges. As the terrorist threat continues to evolve, we need to develop and enhance our counter-terrorism response program and continue to maintain close links with our allies to ensure its adaptability to the terrorist threat at all times. What should be promoted is an active, sustainable cooperation and support of neighboring countries and allies through robust intelligence exchange and other joint efforts. There is no room for complacency.

On that note, allow me again to express my deepest appreciation to the PIPVTR for organizing this forum and I hope I have added value to our discussion.

Thank you very much, good day and Mabuhay.