

YOUTH AS VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS OF TERRORISM: THE PHILIPPINE CASE*

Rommel C. Banlaoi**

I am assigned to talk about “Youth as Victims and Perpetrators of Terrorism”. To limit the scope of my presentation and to provide focus to my discussion, I will share a country study of youth in the Philippines not only as victims and perpetrators of terrorism but also as effective players in preventing the spread of ideas that venerate terrorism. I will concentrate on the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and how young Muslims in the Philippines are lured to join this group. This is also timely to talk about the ASG in the light of the kidnapping of three workers of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and a Sri-Lankan peace advocate from the Nonviolent Peaceforce.

For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines ‘youth’, as those persons between 15 to 24 years old, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States.¹ The Philippine government defines youth as those who are 15-30 years old.

Many researchers and practitioners dealing with youth studies have largely focused their attention on the deviant and risk behavior of youth such as juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, and school drop-out and, in the case of female youth, teen-age pregnancy. Sadly, little scholarly attention has been devoted to the study of youth and terrorism. This is a sad reality considering that the young persons are the most vulnerable to the ideas and acts of terrorism. They are even prone to what sociologists and psychologists call “youth violence” or what political scientists generally call political violence in which terrorism belongs.

I am happy to note that I found an academic journal that is devoted to the issue of youth and terrorism. This journal is called *Political Violence, Organized Crimes, Terrorism and Youth* being published by IOS Press based in the Netherlands. This journal can serve as a good academic platform in giving us a

*Speech delivered at the International Conference on Youth and Terrorism organized by the Ministry of Information in collaboration with the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on Feb 26, 2009.

**Professor Rommel C. Banlaoi is the Chairman and Executive Director of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research (PIPVTR, www.pipvtr.com) and currently a consultant at the National Counter Terrorism Action Group (NACTAG) of the Philippine Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC).

¹ “Youth and the United Nations” at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/qanda.htm>.

better understanding of the many ramifications of youth and terrorism not only in Southeast Asia but also in the world.²

However, there has been no single explanation, to date, on why some youth are engaged in violence and terrorism. What we do know is that the youth is full of exuberance and complex emotions making young people highly prone to various influences that can trigger their aggressive or “rebel” instincts. While many youth have used their exuberance and complex emotions to become great poets, writers, singers, composers, inventors, teachers and leaders, some misguided youth succumb to the negative feeling of rage and alienation that prompt them to join criminal gangs, nuisance fraternities and even terrorist groups.

But when it comes to terrorism, are youth victims or perpetrators?

In my book, *War on Terrorism in Southeast Asia*, I argued that the threat of terrorism in the region predated the gruesome September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. I have also emphasized that before and after 9/11, youth in Southeast Asia, and elsewhere, have become aggrieved victims of terrorism. A study has shown that acts of terrorism have profound psychological impacts on youth victims like posttraumatic stress, severe depression, separation anxieties (in the case of the loss of love ones) and others.³

In the Philippines, there is no doubt that youths have become victims and “perpetrators” of terrorism. Abdurajak Janjalani, the ASG founder, was only in his 20s when he joined the Muslim rebel group in the Philippines and was 26 years old when he formed the ASG in 1989. He originally called this group Al Harakatul Al Islamiyyah, which was joined by a brash of Filipino Muslim youth aging from 16 to 25 years old. Because of his strong charisma and great mastery of Islam, some Muslim Filipino youth in Basilan became so fanatic of Abdurajak enabling him to form an effective cadre of young Muslim fighters not only from his home province of Basilan but also from neighboring provinces of Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Zamboanga. The Islamic thought and political ideas of Abdurajak continue to inspire some Muslim youths in the Southern Philippines.

When Abdurajak died in a police encounter in 1998, his younger brother, Khadaffy Janjalani took his post as the new ASG Amir. Khadaffy was only 22 years old when he became the successor of his older brother. It was during the leadership of Khadaffy when the ASG ventured into vigorous kidnap-for-ransom

² See *Political Violence, Organized Crimes, Terrorism and Youth* at <http://www.iospress.nl/>

³ See Jonathan S. Comer and Philip C. Kendall, “Terrorism: The Psychological Impact on Youth”, *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, Vol. 14, Issue No. 3 (July 2007), pp. 179–212.

activities, the most popular of which is the Sipadan Kidnapping in 2000 involving some 21 tourists, ten of whom were foreigners. Since 2001, the ASG has conducted almost 800 kidnap-for-ransom activities. In 2000-2001 alone, the ASG conducted 140 kidnap-for-ransom activities, the highest recorded in history for one year.

Young and gullible, Khadaffy was effectively manipulated by older ASG leaders known for many criminal activities. Thus, the ASG became more of a bandit group than a terrorist organization when Khadaffy took over. In 2004, Khadaffy attempted to revive the Islamic militancy of the ASG and in 2005 led some ASG operations that were hallmarks of terrorism rather than banditry. But his efforts were to no avail. Khadaffy died in a military encounter in 2006. He was only 31 years old when he passed away.

At present, the ASG is being led by Yasser Igasan who was only 21 years old when he joined the ASG in 1993. Igasan is presently endowed with youthful idealism - more militant and aggressive leader who is expected to reinvigorate the religious extremism of the ASG. Igasan's youthfulness and wide experience in community organizing, resource mobilization, serious Islamic training, and strong linkages with likeminded groups in the Philippines and abroad can make him the "reincarnation" of the ASG founder, Abdurajak Janjalani.

If you are monitoring the developments in the Southern Philippines, you may have heard already of the kidnapping of three employees⁴ of the ICRC on 15 January 2009. Six teen-agers have been accused of abducting the three victims. These abductors were believed to be under the command of notorious ASG commander Albader Parad, who is now in his early 30s but joined the ASG when he was still in his early 20s. Parad was originally reported as responsible for the kidnapping in June 2008 of Ces Drillon, a veteran Filipina journalist covering the Mindanao conflict. On February 13, 2009, the ASG has been reported to have abducted another victim, a Sri-Lankan peace advocate.⁵ At present, the ASG is being led by young and aggressive commanders. Nurhassan Jamiri and Sulaiman Pattah, who are only in their early 20s, are leading the Basilan and Jolo factions of the ASG, respectively. In other words, young people currently rules the ASG.

I need to underscore that the ASG started with less than 1,000 members in 1991. The bulk of ASG membership consisted of young Filipino Muslims who were lured to join terrorist organizations because of economic marginalization and silent discrimination. After a spate of kidnapping activities in the mid-1990s, many young Filipino Muslims flocked to the ASG until it reached a

⁴ The three victims are Andreas Notter, a 38-year-old Swiss national; Eugenio Vagni, a 62-year-old Italian and Mary Jean Lacaba, a 37-year-old from the Philippines.

⁵ The Sri-Lankan victim is Omar Jaleel from Nonviolent Peaceforce, an NGO.

membership of almost 1,500 in 2000. After 9/11, the ASG membership rapidly deteriorated to not more than 400, to date, according to government sources.

With the failure of the peace process of the Philippine government with the MILF, there are fears that the ASG can lure young Muslim rebels in the Southern Philippines to join the group. MILF leader Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim already warned as early as 2004 that a great deal is needed to quickly find a lasting solution to the internal armed conflict in Mindanao “before younger Muslims in the region succumb to the greater radicalism of the Abu Sayyaf”.⁶

I have been visiting the Bicutan Prison in Metro Manila as part of my initiative to de-radicalize suspected ASG members in jail. There are 133 suspected terrorists in this prison facility. Almost 70% of those in prison in the Bicutan facility belong to age bracket 16-35. Among those in prison, I befriended four young inmates, namely Ahmad Santos, Redento Cain Delloso, Edzmar Hayudini and Yacub Basug. Who are these people and why it is important for us to discuss them.

Ahmad Santos is the known founder of the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM), a radical organization of Filipino Muslim converts more known in the Philippines as Balik-Islam (Muslim returnees). Ahmad was radicalized when he was only 21 years old and founded the RSIM when he was only 29 years old. The RSIM was accused of masterminding a series bombings in the Philippines, the most dreadful of which was the Superferry 14 bombing on 27 February 2004.

In the Superferry 14 bombing, 116 were killed and 300 others were injured. Thus, the incident was described as “the worst terrorist attack in the country, the fourth worst terrorist attack since September 11, 2001 and Asia’s worst since the 2002 bombings in Bali, Indonesia.”⁷ I consider the Superferry 14 bombing as the worst maritime terrorist attack in Southeast Asia after 9/11. The person accused of carrying out the bombing was Redento Cain Delloso, a Filipino Muslim convert who was only in his mid-20s during the incident.

Edzmar Hayudini and Yacub Basug are accused of being the lead intelligence officers of the ASG. They were charged of kidnapping, multiple murders and multiple homicide. They have never been convicted to date. They were only in their early 20s when they were radicalized. They reportedly joined the ASG in their early 20s and until they were captured in their later 20s.

So, are youths really victims or perpetrators of terrorism?

⁶ Simon Elegant, “The Return of the Abu Sayyaf”, *Time Asia*, 30 August 2004.

⁷ “Super Ferry bombing last February a Terrorist Attack” *Philippine Star*, 12 October 2004.

For me, some misguided youths have become perpetrators of terrorism because they are victims of difficult circumstances or harsh socio-economic and political conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. Muslim Filipino youth in Mindanao belong to the most marginalized sector of the Philippine society. Based on Human Development Report in 2005, all provinces in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) belonged to the lowest human development index, which means that they have the lowest human development status— poor, impoverished, marginalized and vulnerable. Muslim Mindanao also has the lowest growth rate in the country and this affects the quality of life of the youth sector there.

Muslim youths in Mindanao are so economically and political deprived that they fail to go to school. The out-of-school youth in the Philippines got the highest rate in Mindanao. Results of the Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS) of the Philippine government showed that about 25 percent of the approximately 1 million children and youth aged 6 to 24 years in the ARMM were out of school. Among the children and youth who belonged to families in the bottom 40% income group in the ARMM, 28.4 percent were out of school.⁸ According to the International Youth Foundation, Mindanao's high level of poverty, impoverished school systems, and unstable social and political situation, place its young people at particular risk.⁹ In fact, out of the 138 Muslim detainees at the Bicutan jail that I mentioned earlier, more than half did not finish secondary school while some did not finish elementary school. It even broke my heart when I was administering survey inside the prison that some could not even read or write.

These harsh realities have pushed some young Muslim Filipinos to join criminal, rebel and terrorist groups. Rather than carrying books and pencils, they carry guns and grenades to make a living. They become child or youth soldiers because they were deprived of the opportunities to study in order to become lawyers, engineers, doctors, teachers and others.¹⁰

Based on our study of young ASG members, many unschooled and out-of-work young Muslims in Mindanao have been recruited by the ASG. They are lured by easy cash and weapons.¹¹ They have become “militants for hire”

⁸For more discussion on this report, see “Out-of-school children and youth highest in ARMM” at <http://www.census.gov.ph/data/pressrelease/2003/pr0375tx.html>

⁹ International Youth Foundation at <http://www.iyfnet.org/document.cfm/753>

¹⁰See *Merliza Makinano*, “Child Soldiers in the Philippines” (February 2002) at www.childprotection.org.ph/monthlyfeatures/mar2k2a.rtf

¹¹ See Manny Mogato, “Ransom from kidnappings may revive Abu Sayyaf”, *ABS CBN News* (11 December 2008) at <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/regions/12/11/08/ransom-kidnappings-may-revive-abu-sayyaf>.

motivated by easy but dirty money. While some ASG members are driven by religious fervor, many of the young people who joined the ASG regarded their membership as their means of livelihood.

It is very interesting, and at the same time alarming, to note that in the case of the kidnapping of three ICRC employees that I mentioned earlier, the ASG abductors demanded not ransom payments but free education and development projects for impoverished Muslim communities in exchange for the freedom of their victims.¹²

Despite the sad state of some Filipino youths joining terrorist groups, I am happy to share that many youths in Mindanao are now actively asserting their rightful role as constructive players in addressing the difficult issues of political violence, terrorism and armed conflicts in the Southern Philippines. To address the problem of youth, terrorism and armed conflict in Mindanao youth leaders coming from the different communities of faith and ethnic traditions all over Mindanao organized in November 2008 the three-day MINDANAO YOUTH PEACE CONFERENCE with its theme “*The Muslim, Christian, and Indigenous Peoples youth leaders: looking back, looking inwards and looking ahead*”.¹³ In this conference, the youth in Mindanao declared that “a peaceful Mindanao means the absence of social inequality, injustices, and environmental problems.”¹⁴ They also urged that the vulnerable sectors, “especially the youth, women, and children must be heard, respected, and enjoined in all forms of peace undertakings.”¹⁵

The Mindanao Youth Circle has also been organized to develop a united youth sector for nation-building, peace and development.¹⁶ There are also the Mindanao Young Leader’s Parliament, (MYLP), the Bangsamoro Youth Leaders Forum (BYLF), Bangsamoro Youth March for Peace Movement (BMYMPM), and the like.

¹² Jim Gomez, “Filipino rebels want investment for hostages, *The Associated Press* (29 January 2009) at http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5h_MqB6cWr9AP8Sq8ZrxRtxQrisOgD960P7VG0.

¹³ Mindanao Youth Conference, “Statement of Unity and Solidary of Youth in Mindanao”, *Mindanews* (28 November 2008) at http://www.mindanews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5547&Itemid=95

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶For more information about the vision, mission and activities of the Mindanao Youth Circle, please visit http://ph.88db.com/ph/Services/Post_Detail.page/Clubs_and_Association/NGO/?PostID=279067

But among the youth organizations in Mindanao, I find the Youth of Mindanao for Peace the most interesting. It aims “to build bridges of peace and development” in Mindanao.¹⁷ This group laments the following:

The youth sector serves as the primary source of new recruits for rebel groups, whether secessionist or revolutionary, and worse, even of terrorist or vigilante groups. Their direct exposure to conflict situations, structural violence and marginalization, intercultural prejudice and antipathy, and discrimination-based violence have more often caused them to join these groups in their war against the state, or at the least had made them sympathize and support the insurgency and terrorist movements as civilians. The absence or lack of avenues and opportunities for the youth sector to participate as working partners of civil society in addressing the Mindanao peace and development problem has brought them to the point of hopelessness, where the only viable course for social transformation is taking up arms and/or using violence to combat the ills and gaps of the present system.

Their idealism is slowly waning because of the frustration on the realities of the Philippine society, realities that should not be allowed to influence their thinking in the first place. How are they to fulfill their social roles if they are trapped in these unfortunate circumstances? Before apathy sets in, society should ensure that the potentials of our youth are developed to the maximum and used for their benefit and the other citizens of the Philippines.

Rarely, is the youth sector provided with an opportunity where their collective suggestions and inputs on alternative solutions in addressing the Mindanao peace and development situation are taken seriously and sincerely considered in high-echelon gatherings of policy makers and opinion formers. This is mainly due to the still-pervading traditional notion or belief that the youth is ill-equipped as a sector to act in a proactive and manner and initiate moves in working for peace and development among the peoples of Mindanao.

Efforts of peace building should focus on - and include the participation of - the young for they are the shapers and builders of tomorrow.¹⁸

¹⁷ Youth of Mindanao for Peace at <http://www.geocities.com/kaminkap/about.html>

¹⁸ Ibid.

With that note, let me end my talk by reiterating that some youths have become perpetrators of terrorism because they are victims of bitter circumstances and harsh social, economic and political structures that deprive them the opportunities to develop their full potential as partners for peace and development.

But allow me to underscore that the youth is not only our nation's hope. The youth is the hope of the entire world as they represent the future generation of leaders and citizens who can make our world a better place.

Thank you very much for your attention and God bless you all!