



ABU SAYYAF GROUP

How it began, what came out of it



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BORN OUT of the great ideals for Muslim Mindanao, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) had been reared in deadly warfare. Now, it finds a home in terrorism and banditry.

The ASG had broken ties with the Moro National Liberation Front because of disagreements over substantive issues of the peace talks between the MNLF and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP). The spread of Islamic Fundamentalism and the United States-GRP policy of supporting groups poised to fight with them against their perceived enemies had facilitated the breakup.

Abdurajak Janjalani, a young religious MNLF activist,

founded the ASG in 1991. Janjalani, a talented and educated young leader, who had studied Islamic Jurisprudence for three years in Mecca, Saudi Arabia as a scholar, had questions with the MNLF leadership. Purportedly, in 1987, Nur Misuari sent Janjalani to Tripoli, Libya in a bid to cool him down from criticizing what he perceived as Misuari's "sellout policy" in pursuing peace negotiations and political settlement with the national government. Misuari's leader-

ship style also had been an object of disapproval by Janjalani's group.

Janjalani's minority sentiment could have just died a natural death had his group been able to fully participate in the GRP-MNLF peace negotiations and the ideas acceptable to all major Moro forces like the MILF, been considered.

But this was not the case because the MNLF leadership became hooked up with the national government. Misuari had secured a pledge from the late Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, and later from his widow Cory Aquino, that once in power, the settlement of the Mindanao problem would be top priority in accordance with the aspirations and liking of the MNLF. But when President Cory Aquino became President and Commander-in-Chief of the GRP in 1986, she found herself trapped in the military lair riddled with factionalism.

The military factions in the Aquino government, supported by Christian warlords and former Marcos henchmen having business stakes in Mindanao, made it impossible for the Cory government to keep her pledge. That time, the general sentiment of the government panel in the negotiating table could be summarized as follows: "Why negotiate with a spent-out and weak force (the MNLF)?" and "Why give Mindanao to Muslims when they are just a minority?"

Dissent among the MNLF rank-and-file members was brewing as the national government failed in coming up

with an agreeable solution. But instead of negotiating for the MNLF's goals, its leaders acquiesced into attending various discussions organized by the government where they were lectured on matters that were anathema to the Moro aspirations.

Nur Misuari stuck it out with what was becoming a farce. The concessions the government was willing to offer shied away from the Tripoli agreement. To the dissenters, the government had grown insincere as it shifted focus to finding ways and means to pamper and bribe the MNLF leaders with power, money and privileges and promises of more. The trade-off being that the MNLF must forget the Moro aspirations that had been fought with much Moro blood for decades.

Moreover, Misuari's critics saw the national government was weak being wracked by one *coup de etat* attempt after another, even as it continued fighting against the growing forces of the New People's Army throughout the archipelago. Despite all these developments, Nur Misuari remained hooked up with the government, hoping it would eventually fulfill its pledge.

So, a political settlement was eventually forged, and Misuari disgraced himself in the eyes of many Muslims with his poor performance as governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. In spite of all his efforts, Misuari would later be disowned by the GRP. He rebelled once again as he used to, but his luck couldn't be pushed further. Now, he languishes in prison. Meanwhile, the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf have gained strength from Misuari's failures.

This was the political milieu that pushed Janjalani to set up a religious movement in 1991, and subsequently called for *Jihad* and the establishment of an Islamic State. In Libya he formed a small core of like-minded young Filipino activists. After four years of studies, he returned to the Philippines and

started organizing work.

Back in the country, he found fertile ground for his mission and began linking up with and working within the Tabligh, a self renewal movement that is very popular among Muslims not only in the Philippines but also worldwide. He was able to touch base in and through the Muslim youth and their local leaders, and captured their idealism. Finally, he found international connections with Islamic Fundamentalists. (Marites Dañguilan-Vitug, Glenda Gloria: *Under the Crescent Moon*, 1999.)

CIA trained ASG in deadly warfare

Finding a good opportunity to bleed the Soviet Union in a war of attrition, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Philippine military assisted the Abu Sayaff, directly and indirectly, in acquiring military capability. The duo supported the international *Jihad* call of Muslims all over the world, to assist their fellow Muslims that had been subjugated by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

The CIA poured out millions of dollars to finance the recruitment and travel expenses of volunteers, sponsored training camps and even sent instructors to teach demolition missions and the use of highly advanced portable weaponry that included Stinger missiles. The MILF

was able to send 600 of its men as volunteers (Vitug, Gloria).

Scores of Abu Sayyaf would-be warriors volunteered and were given first-class guerrilla training in Afghanistan, and they fought for a time against one of the best armies of the world—the Soviet Army. It was also in those training camps where they undertook religious lessons in Islamic Fundamentalism and got to know the latest tactics in guerrilla warfare that are now being (ironically) used against US troops in Iraq.

The CIA accomplished its tactical mission of building an effective guerrilla resistance against the Soviet Union leading to total collapse of the vast Soviet Empire. But in doing so, it also helped build an army of guerrilla cells all over the world that were to fight a *Jihad* against the US. One of these guerilla cells is the Abu Sayyaf.

In the home front, the ASG played a vital role against Misuari. Although the CIA gave the ASG military training, it was the Philippine military that gave it "seed" weapons. The formation of MNLF break-away groups was welcomed and encouraged by the military factions in government so that Nur Misuari would have less and less bargaining chip in the negotiating table—a tactic culled from the long tradition of divide and conquer strategy.

Seeing this opportunity,

PNP redeployed one of their deep penetration agents to the Abu Sayyaf lair, the late Edwin Angeles, a half-Tausog. Angeles took the opportunity to earn big by playing double agent. On the one hand, he helped the Abu Sayyaf grow strong while on the other, helped his PNP controllers by giving them a good "facelift" to make them look good to their bosses. He asked for money and arms for the Abu Sayyaf so they would have the means to resist MNLF pressures. The Philippine National Police poured in money and weapons to the ASG, who by now has maintained sanctuaries in MNLF territory. Because of this, the military cast a blind eye on the group's fund-raising activities that included kidnapping and robberies.

Not to be outdone, enterprising military commanders and politicians also forged an "unholy" alliance with the ASG to be able to run a multi-million illegal logging operation in the area. (Vitug, Gloria)

Right after its founding, the ASG conducted a string of bombing and kidnapping operations. Its targets, mostly civilians and foreign tourists, differentiate the ASG from other armed groups in the Philippines. All other armed groups consider the ASG terrorist. To some sections of the civil society, the ASG is simply a bandit. ■

—PhilRights Research Team



Abu Sayyaf group pose for a picture on July 16, 2000.

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