

Written by Amina Rasul

Sunday, 15 November 2009 21:30 - Last Updated Sunday, 15 November 2009 21:52

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The day before Fr. Michael Sinnott was released, we in the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy (PCID) had issued a statement condemning the latest string of kidnappings and criminal acts in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. Father Sinnott's abduction raised the hackles of the international community: Pope Benedict made a well-publicized plea for his release. On November 9, 2009, Kanague Elementary School Principal Gabriel Canizares was beheaded in Jolo, Sulu, after his family failed to pay the ransom demanded by the kidnappers. A few days ago, several Chinese and Filipino nationals were abducted in Basilan, supposedly by the Abu Sayyaf. These latest bloody apoplexy in Mindanao were played up by the media.

The recent rampage of criminal acts was attributed to either the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) or the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in a week when US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was due to arrive. As if on a welcome cue, Father Sinnott was released on Thursday, the day before Secretary Clinton arrived.

Editor's Note: Ms. Amina Rasul apologizes for delaying her article on the "presidentiables." Due to the critical events of this week that she must write about now, the piece on Muslim perceptions of the presidentiables will appear next week.

The grisly beheading of an innocent teacher happened two days before the auspicious day of Ms. Clinton's arrival. Was a stage being set for Secretary Clinton and the nation, as the drama of the Visiting Forces Agreement plays out between the Executive and the Senate? In the old days, the drama would have been called Moro-Moro, but today I dare being called politically incorrect and call it "Kristiyano-Kristiyano."

In reaction to this resurgence of high profile criminal acts, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's Deputy Spokesman Anthony Golez has said that the spate of kidnappings is an embarrassment to the country. We agree. The administration that he represents should indeed be embarrassed, as the government shows it has failed to preserve law and order in spite of the hundreds of millions of dollars invested by the American government to capacitate the military.

If the Visiting Forces Agreement is brought up, we must ask about the status of Balikatan. Almost 10 years of military assistance thru Balikatan has been provided. It is time to ask the Arroyo Administration: Where are the peace dividends from the investment in military strengthening?

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The Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy has sent Secretary Clinton a letter stating that "the relationship of the US government with the Muslim world still is defined by military operations against terrorists and criminal elements" such as Balikatan.

Mrs. Arroyo vowed (yet again) massive retaliation against the Abu Sayyaf. So is there a "Kristiyano-Kristiyano" drama currently being played to support the VFA or does it merely cover up government's weakness in securing the peace in Muslim Mindanao? And will the military's usual knee-jerk retaliation kill more innocent civilians and displace more of our people? Just two months ago such reaction violently disrupted the faithful's Eid'l Fitr prayers in Sulu and resulted in over 1,000 families displaced.

Mrs. Arroyo's administration has poured a lot of money into national defense, such as the P30 billion for the Armed Forces of the Philippines Modernization Fund in 2008. This is besides the annual budget for the Philippine National Police, the Balikatan, the President's Intelligence Fund, and all her other vaunted wherewithal.

The military, of course, is a perennial double talker; claiming one day that the ASG has been decimated but saying the next that it is the Abu Sayyaf that commits these dastardly acts. Who really are committing these monstrous criminal acts in ARMM?

To make matters worse, civil society groups have recently exposed more than a hundred cases of rape in Sulu—girls as young as 12 and women as old as 75 have been raped over the last year. Government, both local and national, has not provided an adequate response. We wonder why Mrs. Arroyo immediately directed the PNP to bring to justice the perpetrators of the rape-slay of a 16-year-old girl in Antique Province  
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February but no statement over the serial rapes in Jolo.

The rampage with which criminal activities run unabated in Muslim Mindanao is clear indication that as far as ARMM is concerned, the Philippines has become a failed state. This lawlessness is an indication of the failure of the Mindanao  
policy of this administration.

Perhaps the investment in capacity building should be made in the local civilian institutions, like the police.

Perhaps it is time to invest in a Balikatan for the police, developing an Islamic Peacekeeping Force by expanding the authority of the Salam Police to actually deal with problems currently delegated to the Marines. Certainly, the Salam Police would know better than to recommend raining bombs during the congregational prayers for Eid'l Fitr.

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PCID has reiterated its call for the strengthening of the national police force so it can better address lawlessness. But this is only part of the solution. We have advocated in the past that the problems of Muslim Mindanao could not be addressed by military strategies alone. Government has to invest, not just primarily in defense, but also in strengthening democracy in the region.

As Secretary Clinton visits the Philippines, the PCID has sent her a letter stating that "the relationship of the US government with the Muslim world still is defined by military operations against terrorists and criminal elements," such as Balikatan. The letter recommends that peace and democracy in Mindanao could best be secured through empowered stakeholders, the protection of citizens, and a strong commitment to a genuine peace process. # # #

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