

PHILIPPINES: THREATS AGAINST GERMAN HOSTAGES RAISE THE QUESTION OF THE CHANGING NATURE OF ABU SAYYAF GROUP

By André Burstin

On Monday September 29, German hostages Stefan Viktor Okonek and Herike Diesen – who are presumably held by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in an unknown location in Sulu Island since last April – launched a distress appeal to the German and Philippine governments in an interview with Zamboanga city’s community radio dxRZ. Stressing that their health condition was worsening, they called German authorities to do “all they can” to ensure their release, adding that they were “not sure how long [they] can suffer”. The authenticity of the message, which was broadcasted through the private network “Radio Mindanao Network” (RMN), was later confirmed by local police sources.

According to Philippine media, the interview was carried out at the personal initiative of ASG’s self-proclaimed spokesman Abu Ramin. To recall, the latter issued a ransom demand for the hostages on Wednesday September 24, asking for 250 Million pesos (5.6 million U.S. dollars) and the immediate end of Berlin’s support “to America, in the killing of our Muslim brothers in Iraq and the Levant in general, and the Mujahideen of the Islamic State in particular.” The group threatened to “slaughter” one of the hostages if these conditions are not met by Friday October 10.

These demands, obviously inspired by the recent beheadings of American, British and French hostages in Iraq and Algeria, were immediately rejected by the German government, which made clear that threats were not “an appropriate way to

influence” its foreign policy. Philippine’s Defence Secretary Voltaire Gazmin stated for his part that his government “do not negotiate with terrorists”, while German and Philippines’ intelligence services are still assessing the reality of this threat. Local police officers indeed expressed doubts over the determination of Abu Sayyaf members to kill the hostages, stressing that their ultimate goal might be to increase their financial revenues.

Although the ASG has been blamed for the worst terrorist attacks committed in the country in the late 1990’s and in the early 2000’s (including the beheading of several foreign and local hostages), the group has indeed suffered major setbacks over the years, including the elimination of its successive leaders. Moreover, it has gradually fragmented into several criminal factions focused on extorting ransoms. In practice, most of the incidents recently attributed to the ASG consisted in the abduction of tourists and businessmen off the coasts of Malaysia, in raids on small villages and in skirmishes against local security forces. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that sources in the German Embassy in Manila stated on condition of anonymity that negotiations with the kidnappers were well underway, which means that a financial transaction remains possible.

On the ground, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have indicated they had deployed more than 1,000 additional soldiers to increase rescue efforts with the assistance of Sulu Island’s local authorities and community leaders. It is worth mentioning that the operation is aiming at releasing not only the two German nationals, but also Japanese citizen Toshio Ito, who was kidnaped in July 2010; Dutch and Swiss hostages Elwold Horn Lorenzo Vinceguerre, who are held since February 2012; as well as several Chinese, Malaysian and Filipino citizens who are still in the hands of various cells of the ASG.

That being said, the jihadist recruitment on the southern Mindanao Island cannot be underestimated, mainly in Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur provinces, in Zamboanga peninsula and in the island provinces of Basilan and Sulu.

Indeed, subsisting cells of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and ground commanders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front are believed to have increased their propaganda on

the Internet, in local schools and on the campus of Mindanao State University in Marawi city. Moreover, members of the ASG have formally pledged allegiance to IS “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in July, as well as other local organizations such as the JI and the Khilafa Islamiyah Movement (KIM).

Although the scale of this phenomenon cannot yet be fully assessed, these facts make us fear that the Philippines terrorist movement may take advantage of the international situation to restructure itself and to strengthen its ability to be a nuisance.

Beyond the righteous indignation and fear provoked by the death threats against the two German hostages, the developments of this case will therefore allow us to make an assessment of the nature of the terrorist threat in the Philippines. While the last beheading perpetrated by Abu Sayyaf members occurred in October 2009 with the assassination of a local teacher, the reoccurrence of such terrorist practice would be indicative of the “re-radicalization” of at least a part of the ASG, which could become again a major threat for the security of the country in the years to come.

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