

NEWSLETTER

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Stability Operations in Southern Asia



Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures



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Foreword

The Army is currently engaged in two fights in southwest Asia. However, future conflicts could possibly be brewing throughout all of south and southeast Asia. The largest Islamic country in the world is not in the Middle East but is in Asia: Indonesia with approximately 197 million Muslims. And throughout southern Asia, insurgency and radicalization is on the rise. At a recent conference in Bangladesh, Major General (Retired) A.N.M. Muniruzzaman of the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies announced south Asia is now the “epicenter for global terrorism.” Not one of the attendees from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the United States, Canada, Germany, Norway, Spain, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore disagreed with him.

The inevitability of an insurgent success is far from fact. Throughout southern Asia, states are responding with critical success against both religious and political insurgencies and providing security for their citizens. In Sri Lanka, the long-running war between the government and the “Tamil Tigers” ended with a government victory in May 2009. Indonesia has taken steps to both run insurgents to ground (including the death of Noordin Top, the Bali bomber) and then turn some away from radicalization and use them to reach out to other insurgents. Thailand’s southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat have been wracked by Muslim extremism and have been met with a combination of military strength and government outreach, keeping the conflict local. The long-running war in the Philippines has seen recent dramatic success against the Abu Sayyaf Group and political agreements with the Moro National Liberation Front. And in Timor Leste, the Australian Defense Force proved that well-trained, disciplined soldiers can bring success even when operating under restrictive rules of engagement.

The 21st century is said to be the Asian century. While that remains to be seen, each of these success stories from south and southeast Asia provide invaluable stability and counterinsurgency observations, insights, and lessons for the American Army.

Handwritten signature of Benjamin R. Mixon in black ink.

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The Sri Lankan Conflict

Jayshree Bajoria

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Introduction

The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has lasted nearly three decades and is one of the longest-running civil wars in Asia. More commonly known as the Tamil Tigers, the LTTE wants an independent state for the island's Tamil minority. Following a fierce, year-long military offensive, the Sri Lankan government claimed in May 2009 that it had defeated the separatist group and killed its leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran. But the group may continue to launch guerilla-type attacks on the country. For a lasting peace, experts say the government will need to find a political solution to the ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils that has plagued the country since its independence. The European Union and Canada have joined the United States, India, and Australia in labeling the LTTE a terrorist organization, which has made it more difficult for the group to get financing from abroad. The civil war has killed nearly seventy thousand, and watchdog groups have accused both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military of human rights violations, including abduction, extortion, and the use of child soldiers.

Historical Context

Sri Lanka has been mired in ethnic conflict since the country, formerly known as Ceylon, became independent from British rule in 1948. A 2001 government census says Sri Lanka's main ethnic populations are the Sinhalese (82 percent), Tamil (9.4 percent), and Sri Lanka Moor (7.9 percent). In the years following independence, the Sinhalese, who resented British favoritism toward Tamils during the colonial period, disenfranchised Tamil migrant plantation workers from India and made Sinhala the official language. In 1972, the Sinhalese changed the country's name from Ceylon and made Buddhism the nation's primary religion. As ethnic tension grew, in 1976, the LTTE was formed under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran, and it began to campaign for a Tamil homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, where most of the island's Tamils reside. In 1983, the LTTE ambushed an army convoy, killing thirteen soldiers and triggering riots in which 2,500 Tamils died.

India, which has its own Tamil population in the south, deployed a peacekeeping force in 1987 that left three years later amidst escalating violence. During the ensuing conflict, the LTTE emerged as a fearsome terrorist organization, famed for suicide bombings, recruitment of child soldiers, and the ability to challenge Sri Lankan forces from the Jaffna Peninsula in the north down through the eastern side of the island. The U.S. State Department placed the LTTE on its terror list in 1997. In 2002, Norway brokered a cease-fire agreement between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. Peace talks broke down the following year, but experts posit the fragile truce held in large part because of devastation related to the 2004 tsunami, which caused thirty thousand deaths on the island.

In August 2005, the assassination of Sri Lanka's foreign minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, reignited the conflict. For the next two years, both the government and rebels repeatedly violated the cease-fire agreement. In January 2008, a cabinet spokesman said it was "useless talking to them [the LTTE] now", and the Sri Lankan government formally withdrew from the truce,

prompting Nordic monitors to pull out of the country. Since the end of the cease-fire, the Sri Lankan military has been trying to root out the LTTE, and in May 2009, the government claimed that it had defeated the rebels and liberated the country.

Taking Control from the LTTE

In November 2005 national elections, candidate Ranil Wickremasinghe of the governing United National Party (UNP) lost narrowly to anti-LTTE hard-liner Mahinda Rajapaksa. Rajapaksa allied his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) with two staunchly anti-LTTE political parties: the radical Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, People's Liberation Front) and the nationalist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU, National Heritage Party) controlled by Buddhist monks. Muslim parliamentarians have also sided with this alliance against the militants.

In 2006, the government launched a military campaign to root out the LTTE, and by July 2007, it had seized control of the country's east. The governing coalition forged a partnership with the pro-government splinter of the LTTE, Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP), and installed the leader of that party as chief minister of the newly created Eastern Provincial Council after May 2008 elections. Experts say this approach would likely be used in the north if the government succeeds in defeating the LTTE. However, rights groups allege the TMVP commits human rights abuses with impunity because of support from the central government. The Sri Lankan government denies these allegations, saying they are intended to discredit it and its allies.

Humanitarian Concerns

Watchdog groups have accused both the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE of engaging in widespread human rights abuses, including abduction, conscription, and the use of child soldiers. In August 2007, Human Rights Watch released a report that catalogues alleged abuses on both sides of the conflict. Amnesty International made similar accusations in its 2008 report on the state of the world's human rights.

Increased fighting in the country's north in early 2009 left more than 250,000 displaced; both the LTTE and the government were accused of placing civilians at risk. The last few months of fighting between the government and the militants resulted in huge civilian casualties and censure from the international community. European Union foreign ministers called for an independent inquiry into alleged war crimes by both Tamil Tiger rebels and Sri Lanka's government. Watchdog groups also accused both sides of violating international laws of war. In April 2009, Human Rights Watch reported while rebels were preventing civilians from leaving the last tiny strip of land where they were fighting the government forces, the government forces repeatedly and indiscriminately shelled the area. United Nations (UN) satellite images suggested the government shelled "no-fire zone" where more than 50,000 people were trapped.

Both sides have also increasingly targeted the media. The government has cracked down on all independent Tamil news sources and denies access to conflict zones for journalists, according to a 2008 report from media watchdog Reporters without Borders. Three journalists have been killed since 2008. The LTTE tolerates no dissent in the areas it controls, while in the rest of the country reporters and editors critical of the government's war against the Tigers are labeled "traitors" and "terrorists," notes a January 2009 report by the International Press Institute. "A hostile environment of intolerance by the top political leadership has created a culture of impunity and indifference" for the attacks on the media, it says.

Funding and Support for the LTTE

Approximately one-quarter of the global Tamil population lives outside of Sri Lanka. Most of the diaspora resides in Canada, the United Kingdom, and India. While some of the Tamils who live overseas support LTTE efforts, the LTTE often uses intimidation to secure most of its funds from abroad. LTTE tactics include telling expatriates to contribute funds to protect the safety of family members back in Sri Lanka, as well as kidnapping affluent Tamils in Sri Lanka for ransoms secured overseas. Members of the Tamil community abroad say the culture of fear that surrounds such tactics is enough to coerce them to fund the LTTE. The U.S. State Department says the LTTE has also used charitable groups, like the Tamils Rehabilitation Organization, as a front for fundraising. These forms of funding have made the LTTE one of the wealthiest militant organizations in the world. In a January 2008 report, the Congressional Research Service said the LTTE continues to raise an estimated \$200 million to \$300 million per year despite recent declines in overseas financing.

India's Role in the Conflict

During the 1970s, India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) helped to train and arm the LTTE, but after the group's terrorist activities grew in the 1980s--including its alliances with separatist groups in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu--RAW withdrew this support. In 1987, India made a pact with the Sri Lankan government to send peacekeeping troops to the island. The Indian forces were unable to end the conflict and instead began fighting with the LTTE. India was forced to withdraw by Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1990. Rajiv Gandhi, prime minister of India at the time of the peacekeeping force deployment, was killed by an LTTE suicide bomber in 1991. Premadasa met a similar fate in 1993.

India has been wary of getting involved in Sri Lanka since then, but trade between the two countries has been on the rise. Bilateral trade increased from \$658 million in 2000 to \$3.2 billion in 2008, and India remains one of the country's leading foreign investors. Sri Lanka is also in talks to form a partnership with India's National Stock Exchange, which may include offering India a stake in Sri Lanka's bourse. The Asian Development Bank in 2008 said the rise in violence had not yet had an impact on growth, which has been driven by strong domestic demand and a robust private sector. But it says the escalating conflict could hamper economic growth. The United Nations Development Program's 2008 statistics show Sri Lanka ranks 104 out of 179 countries on the Human Development Index, which measures education, standard of living, and life expectancy.

India remains concerned about the conditions of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, as it stirs protests and tensions among its own Tamil population in the south. In February 2009, India's foreign minister expressed concern over the safety of civilians in Sri Lanka and said the only way forward would be the devolution of power from the center to the provinces. Under the 1987 accord with India, which was followed by the thirteenth amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution, Colombo agreed to devolve some authority to the provinces and make Tamil an official language of the state. But no government has fully implemented the provisions, say experts.

Washington's Role

Washington has not been a major player in the Sri Lankan civil conflict. According to the Congressional Research Service, the United States has provided more than \$3.6 billion to Sri Lanka since its independence in 1948, most of it in the form of food aid. Military aid was suspended in December 2007 because of Sri Lanka's human rights violations, which are catalogued in the U.S. State Department's annual report on human rights practices. Since 2008, the United States has also been working with the Sri Lankan government through the U.S. Agency for International Development on programs focused on democracy, governance, humanitarian assistance, and economic growth. It also awarded a five year; \$12 million contract to support regional government in Sri Lanka's eastern and north central provinces.

The LTTE campaigns regularly to be taken off the U.S. State Department's terrorist list. In August 2006, federal authorities arrested and charged eight suspects in New York with attempting to bribe U.S. officials to remove the LTTE from the list. The suspects, said to have close ties with LTTE leaders like Prabhakaran, are also charged with trying to purchase surface-to-air missiles, missile launchers, AK-47s, and other weapons for the LTTE.

The Future of the Conflict

By early 2009, many experts said the LTTE's conventional military capabilities had been largely crushed. It is "effectively finished except as a guerilla outfit" says Robert Rotberg of Harvard's Program on Intrastate Conflict and Conflict Resolution. However, he cautions the outfit could carry on a guerilla war for years, depending on the survival of its leader, Prabhakaran. Unlike the 1990s, when the government's claims that it had defeated the rebel force were quickly proved wrong, the army, a much stronger and less corrupt force, has managed to deal a hard blow to the Tigers. Moreover, Rotberg adds, the LTTE has run out of money because of the successful blocking of payments from the Tamil diaspora.

But the larger problem of integrating the island's minority Tamil population will remain even if the LTTE is defeated, say experts. It is essential that the government moves to give "a fair deal to the Tamils and integrate them more effectively in the fabric of the nation" says Rotberg. Ahilan Kadirgamar, spokesperson for the Sri Lanka Democracy Forum, an independent group of activists working to promote democracy, says the government hasn't shown enough interest in moving on to the political process. Much of the country's politics in the last three decades has revolved around the LTTE, with successive governments attempting to wipe out or negotiate with the Tigers, says Kadirgamar. But the group's demise will open up possibilities for the discussion of a whole range of other issues, he writes, "including issues of economic justice, gender, caste, labor rights and democratization." Robert Templer, Asia program director for the International Crisis Group argues in Foreign Policy that the dream of an independent Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka resonates powerfully across the Tamil diaspora and will certainly live on even after the defeat of the LTTE as a conventional military force unless the government works toward a more lasting solution. "The deaths of tens of thousands of innocent Tamil civilians—while their family members watch from afar—is a recipe for another, possibly more explosive, generation of terrorism."

Carin Zissis and Preeti Bhattacharji contributed to this Backgrounder.

Note: This article was updated May 18, 2009 and is courtesy of the Council of Foreign Relations. For more analysis and Backgrounders on Sri Lanka and foreign policy, visit the Web site at <<http://www.CFR.org>>.

Lessons from the War in Sri Lanka

V.K. Shashikumar

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Terrorism has to be wiped out militarily and cannot be tackled politically. That's the basic premise of the Rajapakse Model.

Conduct of Operations

This is how the Sri Lankan government described (through a Ministry of Defence press release) the war strategy of its defence forces on May 18, 2009 after the annihilation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

“Security forces have marked a decisive victory in the humanitarian operations launched against terrorism by killing almost all senior cadres of the LTTE. The security forces commenced this humanitarian operation in August 2006 by liberating the Maavil Aru Anicut with the objective of wiping out terrorism from the country. An area of 15,000 square kilometres was controlled by the LTTE terrorists by 2006. Now the forces have completely liberated the entire territory of Sri Lanka from the LTTE terrorists. After liberating the Eastern Province from the clutches of terrorism on the 11th of July in 2007, the troops launched the Wannu humanitarian operation to liberate the innocent civilians from the terrorists in 2007.”

“The operation was launched by three battle fronts. On March 2007, the 57th Division of the Army under the command of Major General Jagath Dias commencing its operations from Vavuniya marched towards the North. They gained control of the Kilinochchi town on the 2nd of January this year, which was considered as the heartland of the LTTE. In parallel to this, the 58th division, then Task Force One, commanded by Brigadier Shavendra Silva commenced its operations from the Silavathura area in Mannar in the western coast of the island. After capturing Poonaryne and gaining total control along the western coast the Division moved towards Paranthan. Subsequently, the 58th Division then captured Elephant Pass, Paranthan, Kilinochchi, Sundarapuram, Pudukudiyiruppu and finally the eastern coast of the country. The 58th Division has recorded the most number of victories against the LTTE during the course of the humanitarian operation. The 59th Division of the Army, commanded by Major General Nandana Udawatta opened another battle front in Welioya area in January 2008. The troops of this division achieved a land mark victory on the 25th of January this year by capturing the LTTE administrative hub, Mullaitivu.”

“Meanwhile, the 53rd and 55th Divisions of the Army supervised by Major General Kamal Gunarathne and Brigadier Prasanna Silva respectively conducted their operations beyond the Muhamale and Nagar Kovil Forward Defence Line. They consolidated Elephant Pass and Chalai, marking the liberation of the entire Jaffna peninsula from the terrorists. A total of five Divisions and four Task Forces were engaged in operations against the LTTE in the recent past. Entering the last phase of the Wanni humanitarian operations troops of the 53rd, 55th, 58th and 59th Divisions jointly conducted the world’s largest hostage rescue operation and liberated nearly 263,000 civilians by yesterday (May 17, 2009) morning. With liberating all the civilians held as hostages by the LTTE the military operations against the LTTE have reached a decisive juncture with the security forces entrapping the top LTTE rankers to a small patch of land in Mullativu. The Army has launched massive attacks targeting leaders of the LTTE since last night. Almost all top LTTE leaders were killed in these attacks and the troops have also recovered all their bodies.”

“The Air Force, the Navy as well as the Police also contributed a lot for the success of these operations. Destroying of ten ships of the LTTE considered as floating arms storages could be defined as another significant achievement by the Navy. This helped a lot to destroy the military strength of the terrorists. The Navy also implemented a special marine security programme to avert possible escape of LTTE leaders via sea routes. Parallel to this, the Air Force carried out accurate air raids on identified LTTE targets. Indicating the accuracy of the air raids of the Sri Lankan Air Force, on 2nd of November 2007, then LTTE political head Thamil Selvan and four senior LTTE cadres were killed in an air raid. By transporting injured troops and their requirements the Air Force played a pivotal role in the fight against terrorism. Parallel to this the Police secured the law and order of the country by averting LTTE activities to disrupt the day to day life in the south. Detaining LTTE suspects and recovery of large hauls of weapons by the Police was another reason for the success of the Wanni humanitarian operation.”

This official version of the war operations by the Ministry of Defence was released after being vetted by Defence Secretary Gothabaya Rajapakse. Careful planning and crafty military tactics led to the swift and surgical defeat and elimination of the LTTE. Even as the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) was called off in January 2008, the Sri Lankan armed forces were well stocked with multi-barrel rocket launchers, heavy artillery, precision guided missiles and bunker busters. Between 2002 and 2005 the recorded violations of the CFA by the LTTE stood at 3,800 while the government committed 350 violations. After two major attacks by the LTTE in the North and the East and the assassination attempt of General Sarath Fonseka by a pregnant suicide bomber, President Mahinda Rajapakse ordered the commencement of military operations to militarily eliminate the LTTE. In 2007 the East was liberated and Karuna, a LTTE child soldier who grew up to take over as the terror outfit’s Eastern Commander, and then eventually broke away in 2004, was made the Chief Minister of the eastern province.

By December 2008 the Sri Lankan Air Force had launched 400 air strikes. The LTTE realized that it had under-estimated the resolve and resources of the Sri Lankan Army and that it just did not have the depth to fight a conventional war. So as the military advanced, the LTTE retreated taking the civilians with them. When the troops marched into Kilnochchi, the HQs of the LTTE, it was a ghost town. By April 2009 the LTTE along with its civilian captives were boxed in a 12 km stretch of coastal land, which the government declared as a No Fire Zone. It was declared as

a civilian safety zone, which basically meant that the military would not resort to heavy artillery bombardment inside this zone to avoid civilian casualties. The daring military operation to rescue the entrapped civilians and the eventual killing of the top LTTE leadership is described by the Sri Lankan government as the “biggest humanitarian operation” in the world. It is indeed one of the most fascinating surgical military operations ever undertaken. Eventually 300,000 civilians were liberated and housed in the Menik Relief Camps in Vavuniya. In the early days of April 2009 the official government estimate was merely 70,000.

So how did the military prise open the human shield, liberate the civilians and get to the LTTE leadership? Here’s the inside story. By the third week of April, the LTTE along with their civilian captives were bottled up in a rectangular 12 km No Fire Zone (NFZ) coastal stretch, with the Nanthi Kadal (lagoon) on the West and the Indian Ocean on the East. The Navy had set up a marine cordon sanitaire and the army laid siege on the land with troops of the 59 Division covering the West and Southern sides of the lagoon and the 53, 55 and 58 Divisions choking North and North-West approaches. The objective of the military operation was to bifurcate this last coastal stretch under LTTE occupation to facilitate the escape of entrapped civilians. The long coastal stretch from South of Chalai, once a major Sea Tiger base, to Karayamullivaikai was already under army control. On April 18, 2009 Lt General Sarath Fonseka spent his day at the Field Headquarters confabulating with his core team of army commanders and studying the aerial surveillance visuals taken by the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) of the Sri Lankan Air Force. But what was critical to the success of the Army was the stupendously brave and accurate ground intelligence gathering by troops of the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP). Elements from LRRP had infiltrated the NFZ where the LTTE was holed up disguised as civilians and these army intelligence operatives provided the crucial inside information that eventually proved crucial for the success of the military operations.

From the Field HQ in Vauniya, General Fonseka hooked up on the army line with Brigadier Shavendra Silva, one of the illustrious war heroes of Sri Lanka. He told Brigadier Silva that the plan to launch the “biggest hostage rescue operation” in the world was final and that he was being tasked to execute it. Brigadier Silva, commander of the 58 Division, by then had already accumulated a trail of glorious battle milestones from Mannar in the West Coast to Mullaitivu in the East.

The 58 Division, positioned just 300 metres away from the NFZ, had faced the brunt of LTTE suicide attacks for more than a week as the LTTE desperately tried to prevent the army’s final assault. Waves of suicide bombers tried to breach 58 Divisions defences at Velayanmadam, Puthumatallan and east of Puthukkudiyirippu. But the brave soldiers of this Division continued their formidable and aggressive hold of the Forward Defence Line. Brigadier Silva was given a free hand to put together his best team for the final assault on the LTTE to free the trapped Tamil civilians. The 9th Gemmu Watch Battalion, 8th Gajaba Battalion, 11th Sri Lanka Light Infantry Battalion, the 2nd Commando Battalion under the command of Colonel Ralph Nugera and 1st Special Forces Battalion under the command of Colonel Athula Kodippili were handpicked for the rescue operation.

The plan was simple: Breach the LTTE’s Defence Lines and create a safe passage for the entrapped civilians to escape. But this was easier said than done because the LTTE had built a three kilometer earth wall or bundh from Puthumatallan to Ampalavanpokkanai. Behind this earth wall were the bulk of the civilians who were being used as human shields. Three attack formations were constituted. The Alpha Group comprising the 2nd Commando troops along with the 8th Gajaba Battalion were tasked to attack the northern edge of the earth bundh. The Bravo Group comprising 1st Special Forces and the 11th Sri Lankan Light Infantry were to assault the

southern edge of the earth bundh and the 9th Gemmu Watch Battalion, the Charlie Group, was tasked to clear a safe passage for civilian egress.

On a dark Sunday night, April 18, at 11.40 pm, the rescue operation began as all assault formations equipped with night vision devices quietly waded through the Nanthi Kadal lagoon, advancing deep into enemy lines. The troops were given 2 am as the H Hour to reach the earth bund. The moment the troops reached the bundh they engaged the LTTE guard positions on the earth wall. The LTTE offered stiff resistance firing mortars and heavy artillery, but were soon overpowered by superior tactics and reinforcements from the 58 Division. Even as the troops overran LTTE defences, the Charlie Group of the 58 Division cleared mines and improvised explosive devices (IED) and provided covering fire for the civilians to rush over to government controlled territory secured by 55 Division. Immediately, check points were set up to screen the escaping civilians to ensure that LTTE suicide bombers didn't cross over in the melee. As dawn broke on April 19, more than 41,000 civilians had crossed over into army controlled area north of Puthumatalan. On same day again in the dead of the night the second phase of the operation was launched to cut off the LTTE's access to the coast as troops of the 58 Division tried to link up with troops of the 55 Division advancing along the coast.

The link-up of the two army divisions eventually happened by Wednesday - April 21, 2009. By then more than 100,000 civilians had escaped from the LTTE's clutches. Amongst them were Daya Master, LTTE media spokesman and George Master, English Translator of the LTTE leadership. As they crossed over the army check point at Puthumatalan, a civilian spotter employed by the Army identified them and immediately alerted the troops. The duo were immediately taken into custody and transported to Colombo for interrogation. Hundreds of LTTE fighters disguised as civilians also crossed over into army controlled area. Many including child soldiers were apprehended. At the last count more than 3,000 LTTE cadres were arrested as they tried to cross over from the NFZ as civilians.

By now the LTTE had been squeezed into a 5 km zone with its access to sea severely constrained. Exactly a month after the rescue operation was launched the LTTE was exterminated on May 18, 2009. Two days before this momentous development the LTTE tamely admitted defeat, marking the end of Asia's longest running civil war that left approximately more than 70,000 dead in pitched battles, suicide attacks, bomb strikes and assassinations. On May 16, 2009 Selvarasa Pathmanathan, the LTTE's chief of international relations, said in a statement on the pro-rebel Tamilnet website that the war was at "its bitter end". "We have decided to silence our guns. Our only regrets are for the lives lost and that we could not hold out for longer," he added, calling for peace negotiations. But the military refused to let up in their offensive, saying troops were pushing on to recapture "every inch of land" held by the LTTE, which at that point in time was estimated at less than a square kilometre (half a square mile) of jungle. Forty eight hours later it was all over as the government information department sent out a text message to cell phones across the country announcing the killing of Prabhakaran along with his top deputies, Sea Tigers Commander Soosai and LTTE's intelligence chief, Pottu Amman.

The Eight Fundamentals of Victory

The news about the killing of Prabhakaran sparked mass celebrations around the country, and people poured into the streets of Colombo, dancing and singing. Looking back at the war General Fonseka made two insightful observations that must surely resonate in the minds of military strategists dealing with terrorism and insurgency in other parts of the world. The first is on the commitment of the political leadership to eliminate terror.

Eelam IV war began as a poll-promise. President Mahinda Rajapakse rode to power four years ago vowing to annihilate the LTTE. In the early hours of Tuesday the fight for Eelam, a separate homeland for the Tamils in Sri Lanka, begun in 1983 ended in a lagoon, the Nanthi Kadal. Vellupillai Prabhakaran's dead body, eyes wide open, top portion of the head blown off, the thick bushy moustache in place, was found in the lagoon by the Sri Lankan forces looking for remnant LTTE stragglers.

In the President's Office in Colombo officials talk about the 'Rajapakse Model' (of fighting terror). "Broadly, win back the LTTE held areas, eliminate the top LTTE leadership and give the Tamils a political solution." Sunimal Fernando, one of Rajapakse's advisors, says that the President demonstrated a basic resolve: "given the political will, the military can crush terrorism." This is not as simple as it sounds. Like most poll promises he did not have plans to fulfill his promise to militarily defeat the LTTE. Eelam I to III were miserable failures. So the 'Rajapakse Model' evolved, it was not pre-planned.

First Fundamental: Political Will

The first fundamental of this approach was unwavering political will. Rajapakse clearly conveyed to General Sarath Fonseka: "eliminate the LTTE." To the outside world he conveyed the same message differently: "either the LTTE surrenders or face their end." Rajapakse instructed the Sri Lankan Army that their job was to fight and win the war. At whatever cost, however bloody it might be. He would take care of political pressures, domestic and international.

General Fonseka commented: "It is the political leadership with the commitment of the military that led the battle to success. We have the best political leadership to destroy terrorism in this country. It was never there before to this extent. The military achieved these war victories after President Mahinda Rajapakse came into power. He, who believed that terrorism should and could be eliminated, gave priority do go ahead with our military strategies. And no Defence Secretary was there like the present Secretary Gotabhya Rajapaksa who had the same commitment and knowledge on how to crush the LTTE. Finally, they gave me the chance of going ahead with the military plan."

Second Fundamental: Go To Hell

Following from the first, the second principle of Rajapakse's 'how to fight a war and win it' is telling the international community to "go to hell." As the British and French foreign ministers, David Miliband and Bernard Kouchner, found out during their visit. They were cold shouldered for suggesting that Sri Lanka should halt the war and negotiate with the LTTE. As Rajapakse said during the post-interview chatter "we will finish off the LTTE, we will finish terrorism and not allow it to regroup in this country ever; every ceasefire has been used by the LTTE to consolidate, regroup and re-launch attacks, so no negotiations." Eliminate and Annihilate - two key operational words that went with the "go to hell" principle of the 'Rajapakse Model'. After Colombo declared victory the Sri Lankan Army Commander Lt Gen Sarath Fonseka used words used by Rajapakse. That the SLA will not allow the LTTE to "regroup".

Third Fundamental: No Negotiations

Naturally, the third fundamental was no negotiations with the LTTE. "The firm decision of the political hierarchy not to go for talks with the LTTE terrorists until they lay down arms had contributed significantly to all these war victories," affirms Fonseka. But this meant withstanding international pressure to halt the war, the humanitarian crisis spawned by the war and the

rising civilian casualties. Rajapakse did all of this by simply ensuring 'silence' and information blackout under which the war was conducted. Rajapakse's biggest gamble was to give the military a free hand, shut the world out of the war zone.

When the United Nations, U.S. and European countries raised concerns of high civilian casualties, Rajapakse, said that the international community was "getting in the way" of Sri Lanka's victory against terrorism. "We knew that the moment the military is close to operational successes, there will be loud screams for the resumption of the political process of peace negotiations. But there will be no negotiations." That was the rock solid stand taken and communicated by Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse to all visiting dignitaries and diplomats.

Fourth Fundamental: Regulate Media

With just one version of the war available for the media to report, the Sri Lankan government ensured a unidirectional flow of conflict information. The information put out by the LTTE's official website, TamilNet, could not be independently verified on the ground because access to the war zone was regulated and controlled. This was a vital fourth principle in the strategic matrix of the Rajapakse model.

"Presidents Premadasa and Chandrika Bandarnaike gave orders to the military to take on the LTTE. But when success was near, they reversed the orders and instructed the military to pull back, to withdraw from operations because of international concerns about the humanitarian crisis and civilian casualties. So we had to ensure that we regulated the media. We didn't want the international community to force peace negotiations on us," says a senior official in the President's office who wishes to remain anonymous.

Fifth Fundamental: No Cease-Fire

Rajapakse's brother, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, who consistently maintained that military operations would continue unhindered. "There will be no ceasefire," was Gotabhaya's uncompromising message. The clear, unambiguous stand enabled other prominent personalities in the Rajapakse cabinet to speak in a uniform voice. "Human rights violations during war operations and the humanitarian crisis that engulfs civilians caught in the cross fire have always been the trigger points to order a military pull-back," asserted Mahinda Samarasinge, Minister for Human Rights and Disaster Management. "The LTTE would always play this card in the past. They would use the ceasefire to regroup and resume the war."

President Rajapakse was clear that he did not want to go down that route. That was the traditional way of fighting the LTTE - two steps forward, four steps back. The Rajapakse brothers' commitment to a military solution was cast in stone. And it was anchored in a deft political arrangement. But first it is important to reveal the idea behind the political arrangement. "It was to ensure that there would be no political intervention to pull away the military from its task of comprehensively and completely eliminating the LTTE," says a senior official in the President's Office. "Prabhakaran was aware of the political contradictions in Sri Lanka and so was confident that the SLA will not indulge in an adventurous, all guns blazing, a full onslaught against the LTTE."

Sixth Fundamental: Complete Operational Freedom

Gotabhaya Rajapakse's appointment to the post of Defence Secretary was made precisely to break this political logjam. Gotabhaya had a military past. He had taken voluntary retirement from the SLA. He had retained his long standing friendship with Lt General Sarath Fonseka. Gotabaya met Fonseka and asked him, "can you go for a win"? The battle-hardened veteran said "yes, but you will have to permit me to pick my own team." Gotabaya and Mahinda agreed. "We will let the military do its job, while we hold the fort, politically," they told Fonseka. This deft political arrangement worked because both, Gotabhaya and Fonseka, were recruited and commissioned into the army at the same time.

This is the team Fonseka handpicked by August 2006 - Major General Jagath Dias, commander of the 57 Division, Brigadier Shavendra Silva, commander of Task force One also the 58 Division (the SLA formation that has recorded the maximum victories against the LTTE), Major General Nandana Udawatta, commander of the 59 Division and Major General Kamal Gunarathne and Brigadier Prasanna Silva, commanders of the 53 and 55 Divisions respectively. Their task was to recapture 15,000 square kilometers of area controlled by the LTTE. The defection of LTTE's Eastern chief, Karuna, helped the Army take over Batticoloa, Tamil Tigers' eastern stronghold on July 11, 2007.

By the time of LTTE's defeat in the East, the 57 Division under the command of Major General Jagath Dias started military operations north of Vavuniya. Eighteen months later, in January 2009, the 57 Division marched into Kilinochchi, the head quarters of the Tamil Tigers. Parallel to this the Task Force One (58 Division) under Brigadier Shavendra Silva achieved stunning success moving from Silavathura area in Mannar in the west coast, capturing Poonaryne and Paranthan. These troops then swiftly recaptured Elephant Pass, linked up with the 57 Division and further moved to Sundarapuram, Pudukudiyiruppu and finally the eastern coast of the country. Meanwhile, the 59th division of the Army, commanded by Major General Nandana Udawatta opened a new front in Welioya area in January 2008 and within a year marched into the LTTE's administrative hub, Mullativu. Finally, troops from 53rd, 55th, 58th and 59th bottled up the LTTE in along a small patch of eastern coastal land in Mullativu and killed the top leadership, including Prabhakaran.

The decision to bring Fonseka out of retirement paid off because he was a hardcore advocate of military operations to crush the LTTE. With rock solid political backing Fonseka was able to motivate his troops and officers to go all out without fearing any adverse consequences. It's not surprising why Eelam IV turned out to be a bloody and a brutal war. "That there will be civilian casualties was a given and Rajapakse was ready to take the blame. This gave the Army tremendous confidence. It was the best morale booster the forces could have got," says a Sri Lankan minister who wishes to let this quote remain unattributed.

Is it any surprise, therefore, that LTTE wanted to assassinate Gotabhaya in 2006? Prabhakaran knew that if he could assassinate Gotabaya then the carefully constructed political-military architecture pushing the war operations forward would have been gravely undermined. Gotabhaya escaped the assassination bid and the rest as the cliché goes, is history.

So even though Gotabhaya came into the political set up virtually out of nowhere, he quickly became the bridge-head between the President Rajapakse's government and the military. The Rajapakse brothers fused political commitment to a pre-set military goal. "He (Gotabhaya) was embraced and accepted by the military and his was a legitimate voice in the Army," said a

senior official in the President Office. Gotabaya communicated the military requirements to the government - men, material and weapons. His brother and head of the government, President Rajapakse, ensured the military got what it wanted. He in turn instructed Gotabhaya to tell the Army to go all out and get on with the task. The sixth fundamental of the Rajapakse Model also had a clause - Basil, the youngest of the Rajapakse brothers. "Neither Mahinda nor Basil saw their brother Gotabaya as a political threat to their political aspirations. So they gave him a free hand." More importantly, Basil was used by President Rajapakse for political liaison, especially with India.

Seventh Fundamental: Accent on Young Commanders

The other critical element was empowering young officers as General Officers Commanding (GOC) to lead the battle. "I did not select these officers because they are young. But they were appointed as I thought they were the best to command the battle. I went to the lines and picked up the capable people. I had to drop those who had less capacity to lead the battle. Some of them are good for other work like administration activities. Therefore, the good commanders were chosen to command this battle. I thought seniority was immaterial if they could not command the soldiers properly. I restructured the Army and changed almost all the aspects of the organization. I made the Sri Lanka Army a more professional Army. Everybody had to work with a sense of professionalism."

Eighth Fundamental: Keep Your Neighbors in Loop

The seventh fundamental was India and an unsigned strategic partnership agreed by New Delhi and Colombo. India played a crucial part in the Sri Lanka military operations by providing intelligence and other kinds of tactical support. "The moral support, whatever support India gave us, is what they should have given to us. It is their duty to help us in this stage," is President Rajapakse's rather candid admission of the Indian involvement. "I can't demand, I shouldn't demand anything from a neighboring country. I request." The first significant request from Colombo was naval intelligence and intelligence on the movement of LTTE owned merchant navy vessels.

The 15,000 sq km area controlled by the LTTE in northern Sri Lanka known as Vanni was cut off from all land access. The A9 Colombo-Jaffna road ran through it. But in the Southern end was the Vavuniya frontline at Omanthai and in the North beyond the Elephant Pass was the northern frontline. The only way for the LTTE to get its supplies, weapons and other essentials was through the sea route. It had eight 'warehouse' ships, vessels that transported "artillery, mortar shells, artillery shells, torpedoes, aircraft, missiles, underwater vehicles, diving equipment, radar, electro-optical devices and night vision equipment." These ships would travel close to the Sri Lankan coast but beyond the reach of Sri Lankan's coastal Navy. War material from these 'warehouse' ships would be transported into smaller boats protected by Sea Tiger units, which would then make its way to the Sea Tiger bases. This is how the LTTE sustained itself for decades and continually upgraded its conventional military capability through funding provided by the Tamil diaspora.

India played a crucial role in choking this well established supply line of the LTTE. This enabled the Sri Lankan armed forces on the ground to make rapid advances. The Sri Lankan Navy led by Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda, executed a maritime strategy based on intelligence on LTTE ship movements provided by India. In 2006 the SL Navy had tremendous success when, based on Indian intelligence, it launched operations to destroy six LTTE warehouse vessels.

Subsequently, by 2007, two more were destroyed, which completely disrupted the LTTE's supply line. Some LTTE warehouse ships were located at about 1700 nautical miles, south east of Sri Lanka close to Australia's exclusive economic zone. SL Navy clearly does not have this capability and this shows how deep and extensive intelligence sharing between India and Colombo has been ever since 2006.

In a recent interview to the Jane's Defence Weekly, Admiral Karrannagoda said, "It was one of the major turning points in the last 30 years of the conflict. That was the main reason why the LTTE are losing the battle; we did not allow a single supply of replenishment ship to come into (Sri Lankan) waters over the last two and a half years since 2006."

In the final analysis the Rajapakse model is based on a military precept and not a political one. Terrorism has to be wiped out militarily and cannot be tackled politically. That's the basic premise of the Rajapakse Model.

Will the LTTE Resurrect?

Will the remnant LTTE fighters and suicide bombers who infiltrated the Sinhala dominated southern Sri Lanka melt away or are they still capable of mounting guerilla attacks and terror strikes? That's a question which continues to haunt Colombo. One definite outcome of the war is the de-legitimization of the LTTE. Aerial surveillance visuals have confirmed LTTE firing at civilians trying to escape the war zone. These visuals also show a LTTE tank firing, from inside the No Fire Zone, at the advancing Sri Lankan Army troops. The tank positioned behind temporary shelters built by Tamil civilians, opens up in rapid bursts. The UAV visuals show the tank firing over the shanty refugee colony at the forward line of the advancing troops, knowing fully well that retaliatory fire by the Sri Lankan Army would result in civilian casualties.

Stunning visuals captured by the Sri Lankan Air Force of civilians breaking free from the clutches of the LTTE and fleeing towards government controlled areas showed the extent of desperation amongst the entrapped civilians. It also changed the international discourse on the LTTE because this was the clearest evidence that the LTTE did not have the support of the Tamil civilians. For this a lot of credit is due to the Hingurakgoda-based Mi-24 helicopter gunship squadron or the 09 Squadron. Working in close coordination with the Army's LRRP (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols) teams which forayed deep inside enemy territory, the 09 Squadron carried out 400 attack missions and several other missions to carry out aerial surveillance of the LTTE held area where the civilians were entrapped. This heliborne assault squadron played a crucial role in the defeat of the LTTE. In coordinated missions the army field commanders deployed the 14 Mi-24 choppers of the 09 Squadron, constantly engaging the enemy right across the Vanni theatre.

The LTTE fired indiscriminately at civilians trying to escape from the NFZ. "We came through the lagoon. The Army started firing. I had two children. We had to travel through the lagoon. After hearing the firing, we lost ourselves, we lost our property," said K. Selvarasan, Assistant Director of Education, Mullaitivu. Even children caught in the conflict had remarkable stories to narrate. "The LTTE took us away from our parents and put us to fight. They would shoot at us if we tried to escape," said 12-year old Farna Denosa, Kilinochchi. "When we tried to escape they tried to block our movements. When they fired, four of my family died. We did not have food or clothes to wear. I lost my brother, two brothers-in-law and a cousin. But we had to leave their bodies behind," said Jyotiswari, a 10 year old. "Till we escaped we used to hide from the LTTE. If they found us at home they would catch us. They would give some training and deploy us as

LTTE fighters,” said Sasi Kanakariga Pillai. “They also caught me. I trained with them for two months. I managed to escape.”

In the refugee camps there are as many stories as there are people of LTTE’s forcible recruitment of children for its frontlines. “I have two children. My 17 year old was caught. We ran the same day to escape. The LTTE were so desperate that they were recruiting any child they could spot. They assaulted parents to catch children,” said Selvarasan. “We lost 100 students in the war. They were recruited by the LTTE and used in the war. I also ran away to save my 18 year old daughter. On March 18th at midnight I ran away. If I was there, they would have taken her away. I saw most of the children being taken away by the LTTE,” said Rajendra, principal of Bhartiya Vidyalaya, Kilinochchi. It was known for three decades that the LTTE recruited child soldiers. But these testimonies of what it was like to live in a territory controlled by a terror outfit have demolished the myth of the LTTE fighting for the political rights of Sri Lankan Tamils.

Nearly 300,000 civilians are now housed in the Manik Refugee Camps in Vavuniya, which is spread over more than 1,000 acres. These camps are enclosed by barbed wires and access is controlled by the military. Retired army officers have been recalled to manage these camps. Like Brigadier R. Jeyasinghe (Ret), who is in charge of Kadirgamar Village refugee camp which shelters 22,000 internally displaced persons (IDP). “Once demining operations in the Vanni region are complete and the government has set up basic infrastructure these civilians will eventually be resettled back to where they came from,” said Jeyasinghe.

The Sri Lankan government continues to deny open access to the refugee camps and only allows military-conducted visits. So it’s difficult to accurately assess reports of deepening humanitarian crisis in the camps with regard to lack of water, hygiene and sanitation. Reports published in credible international journals, newspapers and magazines suggest a high death rate in the camps because of water borne diseases. Despite these troubles the IDPs are happy to be in safe zone. “We are happy here. Getting a meal in LTTE areas was difficult,” said Sinnaiah Rosalingam, who managed to escape from Matalan.

But the fear of the LTTE still remains. “We were suffering from dictatorship. We like democracy. In democracy lies our future. I wouldn’t like to talk about the LTTE,” said Rajendra. LTTE has lost complete legitimacy in the minds of the Tamil people. But the fear of remnant LTTE cadres prowling around anonymously in the refugee camps is still large in their minds. “I don’t want to tell anything because I don’t know whether the LTTE cadres are here and they might harm me. I fear them,” said Iyanan Gatewali. About 80 persons who held ranks of “Colonel” and “Lieutenant Colonel” in the LTTE had been arrested by the security in IDP camps so far. Officials from the Ministry of Defence officials said: “The arrested suspects had thrown away their weapons, uniforms and cyanide capsules and crossed over to the government controlled areas along with other civilians during the last phase of the war.”

But the Tamil diaspora is not giving up and the Overseas Affairs Office of the LTTE continues to function secretly. “The end of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) simply marks the beginning of a new phase in their struggle for independence,” announced the Canadian Tamil Congress. David Poopalapillai, the spokesperson of this Tamil diaspora outfit, one of the numerous LTTE fronts said, “Mark my words, this Monday (May 18, 2009) marks the beginning of the third phase of our struggle for independence. In the first 35 years since Sri Lanka became independent 60 years ago, we waged a peaceful, Gandhian struggle but achieved nothing. In phase two, the LTTE waged an armed struggle for 25 years and succeeded in globalizing our mission. This Monday marks the beginning of the third and final phase of our struggle to achieve

independence.” Several LTTE front organizations in Europe and America are coordinating a campaign to force the United Nations to investigate the alleged war crimes of the Sri Lankan forces. Bruce Fein, a former associate deputy attorney general, representing a LTTE front in the US, Tamils Against Genocide, has filed a 1,000-page report with the U.S. attorney general’s office detailing alleged war crimes, charges of genocide and torture against President Mahinda Rajapakse and General Sarath Fonseka. The objective of diaspora Tamils who continue to support the objectives of the LTTE is to win a legal ruling denying Rajapakse and Fonseka “U.S. visas and freeze their assets” and indict them under the Geneva Genocide Convention of 1949.

Selvarasa Pathmanathan, also known as KP, head of LTTE’s Office of Overseas Purchases has taken over as the new chief of the LTTE. The overseas office of the LTTE, nicknamed by intelligence agencies as the ‘KP Department’ has promised to take LTTE’s separatist struggle off-shore. He released a statement from an unknown location (possibly from a Nordic country) announcing the formation of “provisional transnational government-tamil eelam” (PTB-TE) to pursue the goal of “an autonomous homeland for the Tamil population.” This shows the Tamil Diaspora has taken over the separatist movement. In any case the international support architecture of the LTTE is intact and continues to function. According to a Jane’s Intelligence Review report released in July 2007, the ‘KP Department’ complemented by the dreaded intelligence gathering network, the Aiyanna Group control the international financial and procurement operations of the LTTE. The group has a presence in 44 countries and has established a structured presence in 12 countries, which contribute the funds to sustain the LTTE. The KP Department along with Aiyanna Group earns an annual profit margin of \$200 to \$300 million USD through financial and procurement operations around the globe, according to the Jane’s Intelligence Review report.

It is in this context that Sri Lanka has appealed to the international community to support the dismantling of the LTTE’s global network. “It is important for the international community to take all measures to assist the government of Sri Lanka, to track down the global network of the LTTE,” Foreign minister Rohitha Bogollagama stated at the 8th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore recently. “The elimination of the LTTE from Sri Lanka as a terror organization would prevent other facets of terrorism, such as money laundering, narcotics trafficking and human smuggling, arms smuggling.” At this security forum he met Lt Gen Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of General Staff, People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of China and thanked him for assisting Colombo “during the demanding times”.

In its fight against the LTTE, Colombo made new friends and the friendship is now being publicly felicitated through bill boards that have sprung up across the island nation thanking China, Russia and Pakistan for providing weapons, fighter jets and multi-barrel rocket launchers. “Sri Lanka is one of those rare cases where terrorism has been comprehensively defeated despite all the advice, reservation and fears. Instead of succumbing to these pressures, the government sought assistance from non-traditional allies,” said Palitha Kohona, the foreign affairs secretary. “This effort paid handsome dividends. Iran, for example, pledges over \$1.9 billion in development assistance to Sri Lanka. China’s share of development assistance topped \$1 billion.”

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan troops continue to recover weapons abandoned and hidden by the LTTE. The key finds include 152 mm artillery guns, underwater submersible vehicles (USV) including an indigenized USV construction and assembly line at Udayarkattukulam area in Mullaitivu, satellite communication equipment, surface-to-air missiles, improvised Multi Barrel Rocket Launchers, anti-aircraft guns and battle tanks. Claymore mines, 9 mm and T-56 ammunition,

light aircraft, radars and large caches of assault rifles and multi-purpose machine gun have also been recovered. In Colombo, two LTTE officials, Velaudhan Dayanidi alias Daya Master (spokesperson) and Velupillai Kumar Pancharathnam alias George Master (translator) are providing detailed insights on the 30 year reign of the LTTE and its operations.

There is enough evidence to prove that the top LTTE leadership, including Prabhakaran, had planned an escape by the sea route. But the Sri Lankan armed forces foiled the escape plan. A fully operational LTTE underwater submersible vehicle was recovered from the sea, off the coast of Vellamullivaikkal. It was found underwater and close to the location of 'Farah 3', a ship that was kept in readiness to evacuate the LTTE leadership to safety. But the speed with which the Sri Lankan forces advanced ensured that the terror outfit did not survive to renew its violent campaign.

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The Malay-Muslim Insurgency in Southern Thailand: Understanding the Conflict's Evolving Dynamic

Dr. Peter Chalk

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Introduction

Separatist violence in the Malay-Muslim provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani is not new, with a history that goes back nearly half a century. However, unrest in this part of Thailand has captured growing national, regional, and international attention during the past several years due to the heightened tempo and scale of rebel attacks, the increasingly jihadist undertone that has come to characterize insurgent actions, and the central government's often brutal handling of the situation on the ground. In addition, there are growing concerns that the conflict is no longer purely local and at risk of being hijacked by outside extremists to avail wider transnational Islamist designs in Southeast Asia.

The present Malay-Muslim insurgency raises four important questions. First, what, precisely, accounts for the recent spike in attacks, and in what manner does the current bout of violence differ from that in the past? Second, what is the likelihood of the southern border provinces morphing into a new front for jihadist terrorism? Third, in what ways has the government's counterinsurgency (COIN) approach contributed to and exacerbated unrest in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat? And fourth, what are the prospects for future stability in the region following the September 2006 coup that ousted the hard-line administration of Thaksin Shinawatra?

This paper addresses each of these critical issues. It starts with a brief historical background of the root causes for Malay-Muslim discontent in southern Thailand. The paper then goes on to discuss the evolving nature of the insurgency, dividing the struggle into three distinct stages: 1960–1998, 1998–2004, and 2004 to the present. Having established a context for delineating the changing nature of rebel tactics and violence, the paper considers to what extent the altered and more acute nature of post-2004 unrest can be attributed to a growing external jihadist presence. This is followed by an analysis of the government's COIN response—gauged in terms of both military and political effectiveness—after which an overall assessment of the current standing of stability in the southern border provinces is provided. The paper concludes by highlighting several prescriptive recommendations that could be usefully employed in the immediate future to contain the Malay-Muslim separatist struggle and prevent it from going “critical.”

Background

Islamic fundamentalist violence in Thailand centers on the separatist activities of the Malay-Muslim population in the country's southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Historically constituted as part of the former kingdom of Patani (Patani Darussalam), three main pillars have traditionally underscored Malay separatist identity in this region: (1) a belief in the virtues and “greatness” of the kingdom of Patani, (2) an identification with the Malay race, and (3) a religious orientation based on Islam. These base ingredients are woven together in the tripartite doctrine of hijra (flight), imam (faith), and jihad (holy war), which collectively asserts that all Muslim communities have both a right and duty to withdraw from and resist any form of persecution that is serving to place their survival in jeopardy.

The roots of indigenous Malay-Muslim dissatisfaction and perceived discrimination trace a history back to the establishment of the modern Thai state by the Chakkri dynasty in the 18th century, when a vigorous attempt was made to extend central control over Patani. Although the local population was initially able to resist external penetration, the entire kingdom had been brought under effective Siamese rule by the late 1700s. During the 19th century, increasingly uniform, centralized bureaucratic structures were introduced throughout the region to forestall the steady expansion of British colonial influence throughout the Malay Peninsula. As part of this process, chieftains in the Patani rajadoms were absorbed into the salaried administration—effectively becoming Siamese civil servants. In addition, a conscious effort was made to reduce the range of issues with which Islamic law could independently deal by extending the jurisdiction and ambit of the Thai legal system.

The pace of assimilation gathered strength during the 1930s, when several key changes were introduced. The old local-government structure, which had at least allowed some autonomous Malay political representation, was replaced by a simpler, more Bangkok-oriented system. In addition, three provincial units were carved from the original Patani region—Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—all of which were placed under the direct control of the Ministry of the Interior (MoI). A modernization program was also initiated to eliminate “backward” Islamic customs and dialects and enforce uniformity in language and social behavior.³ As part of this latter endeavor, Western cultural and customary habits were stressed, and steps were taken to completely phase out shari’a law.

A military-orchestrated shift in political power toward overtly conservative and authoritarian elements in 1947 further entrenched the Thai government’s resistance to any form of regional linguistic, cultural, or religious autonomy in the south. A policy aimed at concurrently severing the link between Malay ethnic and Muslim religious identity through a directed process of “Thaization” was duly instituted and, save for episodic (and, in most cases, symbolic) concessions, has remained in place ever since.

The effort to draw southern Malay Muslims into the national Thai family has been singularly unsuccessful. During the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat existed as zones of dissidence characterized by, if anything, only sullen submission to Bangkok’s rule. Over the past five years, the situation has further deteriorated to the extent that the so-called deep south is now in the throes of what amounts to a full-scale ethnoreligious insurgency. The reasons for the failure of Thai integrationist policies reflect a steely determination on the part of the local Malay-Muslim population to maintain their unique way of life—a resolve that has been, at least partly, amplified by the region’s lack of economic development, corruption, arbitrary repression, and, at times, highly brutal internal security measures (including targeted killings and abductions).⁴

The Insurgency

The insurgency can be divided into three broad phases: 1960–1998, 1998–2004, and 2004 to the present.

1960–1998

Between 1960 and 1998, a variety of militant separatist movements operated in the southern Thai provinces. While different ideological and operational outlooks characterized these groups, they were all motivated by a common desire to carve out an independent Muslim state with Pattani as the center. Violent action in pursuit of this objective typically fell into the classic pattern of

low-intensity conflict, generally involving ambushes, kidnappings, assassinations, extortion, sabotage, and bomb attacks. The main aims were to present the southern provinces as an area that remained beyond the sovereign control of Bangkok, to create a sense of insecurity among ethnic Thais living in the region, and to place additional pressure on the central government to accede to the political demands of Malay-Muslim separatism. Three principal groups were at the forefront of this unrest: Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), and New PULO—all of which were rurally based and organized along conventional, hierarchical lines.

Barisan Revolusi Nasional

In 1960, Ustaz Haji Abdul Karim Hassan established BRN in response to a government education-reform program that forced the network of nominally independent religious boarding schools (or ponoh) in Pattani to take on a secular curriculum in addition to their Islamic studies. Retaining strong ties to the Communist Party of Malaya, the organization harbored avowedly panborder aspirations that were essentially based on three principles: anti colonialism and anticapitalism, Islamic socialism, and Malay nationalism defined in terms of the oneness of God and humanitarianism.

From its inception, BRN was fully committed to armed struggle, vigorously rejecting the Thai constitution and its concomitant political system as both illegitimate and irrelevant. The group saw its objectives in two distinct phases: first, to bring about the complete secession of the southern Muslim provinces to reconstruct Pattani as a sovereign state completely independent of Thailand; second, to incorporate this polity into a wider pan–Southeast Asian Malay-Muslim socialist nation governed by a single leader and united under one common flag.

Benefiting from clear ideological objectives and with a solid operational base at its disposal, BRN emerged as a prominent threat to law and order and had, by the 1980s, demonstrated a proven ability to conduct operations throughout Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat as well as in Bangkok itself. The group never managed to attain the type of critical mass needed to seriously challenge Thai central authority, however, largely because its left-wing platform did not sit well with the basically conservative sentiments of the Malay-Muslim population in the south. These difficulties became even more pronounced as left-wing ideologies began to lose their broader appeal (and credibility) during the latter years of the Cold War. Compounding BRN's problems was factional infighting and splits brought about by its own efforts to span the spectrum of nationalism, religion, and socialism—something that became particularly evident with the group's progressive and systematic disaggregation throughout the 1990s.

Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO)

PULO was the largest and most prominent of the various rebel groups active in southern Thailand between 1960 and 2000. It was formed in 1968 by Tengku Bira Kotanila (aka Kabir Abdul Rahman), an Islamic scholar who had become disillusioned with what he saw as the limited and ineffectual nature of the established Malay opposition in Pattani. PULO adopted a dual-track strategy of nonviolent and violent action. The former was directed at improving the standard of education among the southern Malay population as well as fostering and nurturing their political consciousness and ethnonational identity. The latter, militant track was essentially aimed at intensifying international publicity on the plight of the indigenous southern Thai population through armed action and was primarily the responsibility of a separate wing known as the Pattani United Liberation Army.

At its height, PULO numbered approximately 350 hard-core cadres. Benefiting from safe haven in the northern Malaysian state of Kelantan (allegedly provided with the “blessing” of the ruling Parti Islam SeMalaysia), these militants carried out several prominent attacks against perceived symbols of Thai oppression, schools, teachers, local government officials, administrators, and Buddhist settlers. Improved border cooperation between Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur from 1998 onward, however, deprived PULO of this external sanctuary and resulted in the detention of several of the group’s leading members, including chief of military operations Hayi Sama Ae Thanam. These setbacks triggered a major tactical reassessment on the part of PULO’s mainstream membership, many of whom subsequently fled abroad or took advantage of a government-sponsored amnesty program and surrendered directly to the authorities. The resultant internal hemorrhaging was decisive and had, by 2000, essentially crippled the group as a concerted insurgent entity.

New PULO

New PULO emerged as a dissident faction of the original PULO in 1995. Established by Arrong Moo-reng and Hayi Abdul Rohman Bazo, the group pursued the goal of Pattani autonomy largely through a single-minded policy of militant action (as opposed to the dual track violent/nonviolent agenda favored by its parent organization), focusing on attacks that were designed to perpetually harass the police and disrupt the normal course of social, political, and cultural interaction. A so-called Armed Force Council overseen by Haji Da-oh Thanam coordinated three sabotage wings to carry out these operations, each vested with a specific area of geographic concentration:

- the Sali Ta-loh Bueyor Group, which had responsibility for Narithiwat’s Ja-nae and Sri Sakhon districts
- the Maso Dayeh Group, which covered Yala’s Betong district
- the Ma-ae Tohpien Group, largest of the three, with a mandate for any district in Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani

According to the then Thai interior minister, Major General Sanan Kachornprasart, New PULO supplemented these units with part-time activists who were used to carry out rudimentary, ad-hoc missions, such as burning down bus depots. In many cases, petty thieves and young drug addicts were bribed to undertake these operations, with typical financial inducements generally in the range of 300–500 baht. Inducting this type of criminal element into the New PULO organizational structure offered the advantage of freeing up more professional cadres for higher-profile strikes. In addition, it conceivably helped to reduce the possibility that critical intelligence would be passed on to the security forces in the event that a saboteur was captured and made to confess.

As with PULO, New PULO cadres benefited greatly from the provision of an external safe haven in northern Malaysia to plan and prepare for attacks as well as to escape the dragnet of Thai security forces. This tactical advantage was similarly lost in 1998 in line with improved border-security cooperation, which, as in the case of PULO, also resulted in the capture of a number of key individuals, including, notably, Rohman Bazo and Haji Thanam. These losses had a highly significant impact on New PULO’s standing morale and long-term strategic calculations, galvanizing a membership exodus that was as absolute as the one that had occurred with its parent movement.

Bersatu

BRN, PULO, and New PULO never made any really concerted attempt to coordinate their operational activities largely due to their different ideological outlooks. That said, the three groups did briefly agree to form a tactical alliance in mid-1997 in an attempt to refocus national and regional attention on the “southern question.” Operating under the banner of Bersatu (literally “solidarity”), BRN, PULO, and New PULO carried out a coordinated series of bombing, incendiary, and shooting attacks—code-named Falling Leaves—that resulted in nine deaths, several dozen injuries and considerable economic damage. At the time, the jointly orchestrated strikes marked the most serious upsurge in Malay-Muslim separatist activity since the early 1980s.

Although Falling Leaves was certainly successful in heightening the overall visibility of the Muslim cause in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, it also dramatically increased regional pressure on Malaysia to step up cross-border cooperation with Thailand (on the grounds that the attacks would not have been possible in the absence of a secure militant safe haven in Kelantan). As noted, Kuala Lumpur duly responded with several high-profile arrests of PULO and New PULO members, marking a major shift in the government’s hands-off stance to what it had traditionally referred to as a purely domestic Thai problem. The change in policy—which came with the specific approval of Mahathir bin Mohamad—was decisive in its effects, essentially marking the demise of the PULO, New PULO, and (to the extent that it still existed) BRN separatist campaign. As one Thai intelligence official remarked at the time, “[Because] Malaysia has shifted its policy and [is denying] the separatists sanctuary, it will undoubtedly cause them more trouble. . . . The movements simply cannot survive militarily [without the benefit of] Malaysian... support”.

1998–2004

The scale of unrest in the southern provinces dropped markedly in the late 1990s. Certainly, the effective demise of New PULO and, especially, PULO was highly relevant in this regard. Just as importantly, however, were signs (albeit short lived) that the Thai government was beginning to show somewhat more sensitivity to the lack of economic and administrative development in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. Not only did Bangkok pledge to promote the region’s natural resources and invest greater sums in occupational training for local Malays, moves were also made to enhance police, military, and political understanding of the unique Malay-Muslim way of life. Much of this latter endeavor was directed through the Southern Borders Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC), which had first been established in 1981 under the MoI to educate bureaucrats and security officials in cultural awareness and the local Pattani language (known by Thais as Yawi) as well as to formulate broad-ranging policies for ameliorating the conflict.

The respite in violence proved to be only temporary, however, largely because the Thai government failed to capitalize on the insurgents’ disarray by quickly winning over the local population through the initiation of a genuine hearts-and-minds campaign. Undertakings to lift the overall economic and unemployment situation of the south were largely not carried through, nor were there any directed efforts to increase Malay-Muslim participation in local business and administration. Equally important, on assuming power in 2001, the newly elected government of Prime Minister Thaksin dismantled the Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SBPAC12)—the one multiagency mechanism that had begun to demonstrate at least a partial track record in conflict resolution—and transferred internal security responsibilities in the south to the police, an institution that is generally regarded as being heavier-handed than the army.

The first signs of a return to violence surfaced at the end of 2001, when five well-coordinated attacks on police posts in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat left five officers and one village defense volunteer dead. The level of unrest gathered pace during the subsequent two years—rising from 75 incidents in 2002 to 119 in 2003—dramatically escalating in early 2004 with a series of highly audacious operations. January saw one of the most brazen robberies ever to have taken place in the south, involving a group of roughly 100 unidentified Muslims who raided a Thai army camp in Narathiwat and made off with more than 300 weapons, including assault rifles, machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades. Two equally bold operations quickly followed suit. The first occurred on March 30 and involved masked gunmen who descended on a quarry in the Muang district of Yala and successfully stole 1.6 tonnes of ammonium nitrate, 56 sticks of dynamite, and 176 detonators. The second, known as the Krue Se Siege, took place on April 28, when machete-wielding militants attempted to overrun a string of police positions and military armories in Pattani, Yala, and Songkhla. One hundred eight attackers were ultimately killed in the incident, 31 of whom were shot after seeking refuge in the central Krue Se mosque.

The events in early 2004 heralded the onset of the most recent and bloodiest stage of the insurgency—forcing Bangkok to accept that it was now confronting a concerted ethnoreligious insurgency with explicit political underpinnings.

2004–2006

Between January 2004 and the end of August 2007, 7,743 incidents were recorded in southern Thailand, leaving 2,566 dead (which equates to an average of 58 per month or roughly two a day) and a further 4,187 wounded. While civilians have been the hardest hit (accounting for more than 70 percent of all fatalities), both the police and military have also suffered significant losses with respective casualty counts amounting to 711 and 689. Most attacks have taken the form of drive-by shootings and assassinations (3,253), acts of arson (1,298), and bombings (1,189) using improvised explosive devices (IEDs). For a population that numbers only 1.8 million, these figures represent a considerable toll.

Unlike the earlier phases of violence, there does not seem to be a centralized organizational nucleus of defined groupings behind the current bout of insurgent and terrorist activity. According to most commentators, attacks are the work of an amalgam of militants drawn from the decimated ranks of New PULO, PULO, and BRN as well as emergent ad-hoc Islamist entities, such as Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani (GMIP) and the Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani, combined with an amorphous collection of disaffected youths; out-of-work farmers, laborers, and tradesmen; and co-opted criminal elements.

Estimates of the number of people actively engaged in violent attacks vary greatly from 5,000 to 6,000 to as many as 20,000 to 30,000—although most informed sources tend toward the lower end of the numerical spectrum. According to Thai police officials, the militant base is loosely organized around urban-based cells, each numbering between three and four cadres that are then grouped together to form independent teams of between 16 and 18 operatives that function at the tambol, or subdistrict, level. Actual recruitment is left up to respective unit leaders, but most cadres that have been co-opted into insurgent ranks tend to be working-class males between 16 and 24 years old who are generally religiously pious and relatively well educated.

Armed actions are reportedly carried out by dedicated (team) military wings known as Runda Kumpulan Kecil (or small patrol groups), the members of which are reputedly trained in unarmed combat, weapon handling, bomb making, and sharp-shooting. Available weapons for these squads include IEDs, knives, machetes, pistols, and automatic rifles and grenade launchers—most of which are locally made, stolen from the security forces, or procured from former PULO, New PULO, and BRN stocks.

The ostensible goal of the current manifestation of the insurgency appears to be the creation of a separate Malay-Muslim state within five years (dating from January 1, 2004). The supposed 1,000-day plan was discovered during a 2006 search at an Islamic school in Pattani and was allegedly developed by Masae Useng, a former BRN member who is wanted in connection with an arms robbery in Narathiwat. Beyond this basic objective, the insurgency does not seem to be guided by any overarching strategy other than fostering communal hatred between Muslims and Buddhists and making the southern Malay provinces ungovernable.

Despite lacking clear organizational coherence and strategic direction, Malay-Muslim rebels currently operating in southern Thailand have clearly taken their campaign of violence to a level of sophistication and, at times, ruthlessness not seen in the past. Besides the higher intensity of attacks noted, there are indications that militants now possess the means to both produce and deploy relatively large bombs. One IED that was detonated on the Thai-Malay border in February 2005, for instance, weighed 50 kg, which stands in stark contrast to earlier versions that were typically in the 5- and 10-kg range and packaged in simple everyday items, such as shopping bags, plastic lunch boxes, and PVC (polyvinyl chloride) tubing. Apart from size, the makeup of bombs is also more sophisticated than in the past. This has been most apparent with cell phones, which are now routinely used to trigger IEDs. These mechanisms are generally recognized as being far more effective than the older, Chinese-made analog clocks on which southern Thai extremists traditionally relied, not least because they allow for external detonations in clear line of sight of a specific target and at a particular time.

The ability to pull off audacious and complex operations has equally expanded. Most attacks are now integrated and executed along a full modality spectrum—often embracing explosions, arson, assassinations, and random shootings—to maximize overall impact. Coordinated bombings are also surfacing with more regularity. One notable case occurred in April 2005, when simultaneous explosions struck Hat Yai International Airport, the French-owned Carrefour supermarket, and the Green Palace World Hotel in Songkhla. The attacks generated widespread concern—both in Thailand and regionally—not least because they represented the first time that Malay extremists had struck outside the insurgent-plagued provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. Another highly publicized incident involved coordinated bombings that targeted 22 commercial banks in Yala during August 2006. Interestingly, two of the facilities that were struck were Muslim owned, which surprised a number of observers. However, the fact that both were Thai-created would seem to suggest that the motivation was still related to the basic Malay ethnonationalist struggle against Bangkok, in the sense that the banks were seen as symbolic of a repressive Thai-Buddhist polity.

Finally, the current bout of instability in the south has been marked by an explicit religious, jihadist undertone of a sort not apparent in past years. Reflective of this have been frequent attacks against drinking houses, gambling halls, karaoke bars, and other establishments associated with Western decadence and secularism; the distribution of leaflets (allegedly printed in Malaysia) specifically warning locals of reprisals if they do not adopt traditional Muslim dress and fully respect the Friday holiday; and the increased targeting of monks and other Buddhist

civilians—often through highly brutal means such as burnings and beheadings (between January 2004 and the end of August 2006, 16 decapitations were recorded in the region) in an apparent Taliban-style effort to destroy the societal fabric by fostering religious-communal fear, conflict, and hatred.

A New Front in the Global Jihad?

Several Western and regional commentators have expressed concern that the altered and more acute nature of post-2004 unrest in the Malay-Muslim provinces is indicative of a growing penetration involving radicals with links to (the Indonesia-based) Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and, through this movement, to the broader global jihadist network. In particular, a fear remains that a process of fanatical Arabization, similar to that which has occurred in the outlying areas of the Philippine archipelago, may now be taking place in Thailand's deep south, possibly heralding the emergence of a new tactical center for anti-Western attacks in Southeast Asia.

Compounding these fears are reports that money from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan is increasingly being channeled to fund the construction of local Muslim boarding schools, private colleges, and mosques dedicated to the articulation of hardline Wahhabist and Salafist teachings. A number of prominent clerics alleged to be connected to international Islamist elements have been tied to these institutions, including Ismail Luphi, who is known to have met with convicted 2002 Bali bombers Ali Ghufron and Ali Amrozi bin Haji Nurhasyim. A 2004 assessment by Thai military intelligence that was leaked to the press suggests that there are at least 50 educational establishments scattered throughout Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat that Islamist forces have decisively penetrated to recruit and train students for holy war.

It is certainly reasonable to speculate that at least some outside Islamist entity has attempted to exploit the ongoing unrest in southern Thailand for its own purposes. To be sure, gaining an ideological presence in this type of opportunistic theater is a well-recognized and —established practice of the JI movement and one that was integral to the institution of the mantiqi cell structure that characterized its operational development from the late 1990s onward. That said, there is (as yet) no concrete evidence to suggest that the region has been transformed into a new beachhead for panregional jihadism. Although there is a definite religious element to many of the attacks that are currently being perpetrated in the three Malay provinces, it is not apparent that this has altered the essential localized and nationalistic aspect of the conflict. At root, the objective remains very much focused on protecting the region's unique identity and traditional way of life—both from the (perceived) unjust incursions of the Thai-Buddhist state and, just as importantly, the unprecedented influx of cross-border movements of trade, commerce, and people. As one Western diplomatic official in Bangkok remarked,

There is absolutely no sign that the south is emerging as a new JI-jihadist hub: Violence and insurgency to the extent that it exists as an organized phenomenon still revolves around the protection of the unique Malay-Muslim way of life and [continues to be] directed toward the attainment of autonomy or independence. Although the militants will adopt the rhetoric of regional jihad as a tool, they do not yet appear to be evolving along the same extremist lines as [Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Rajah Solaiman Movement] terrorists in the southern Philippines.

Moreover, precisely because Thailand's southern border provinces continue to be characterized by an extremely strong sense of Malay-Muslim self-identity, they have a built-in barrier against external penetration. Journalists, academics, security officials, and religious elders universally agree that it would be extremely difficult for a group, such as JI, to come to the region and introduce (much less entrench) its ideology, simply because the indigenous population would reject any sort of proselytism that emphasized that there was a better or purer form of Islam than the one being practiced on the ground. To cite the words of one senior and well respected Pattani pondok guru, "Our people may not be educated in the formal sense, but they have an unshakable understanding of their faith."

While it is also true that the scale and sophistication of violence has increased, there is nothing to link this change in tempo to the input of punitive, absolutist JI ideological imperatives. Certainly, there is no indication that the ethos of suicide terrorism—a hallmark of Islamist extremism in Indonesia—has taken hold in the south. Indicative of the general sentiment among local extremists toward martyrdom was the following answer given by one captured militant who was approached by a JI recruiter and asked whether he was prepared to blow himself up in the name of Allah. The youth said, "Yes, but only after you show me how." Local sources universally agree that the mindset of rebels on the ground is such that they want to live to witness the fruits of their struggle.

Far from JI-instigated, most informed commentators tend to interpret the heightened intensity of attacks as merely reflective of learning and development on the part of indigenous rebel groups, possibly combined with the infusion of an increasingly competitive criminal interplay involving gambling syndicates, drug lords, and corrupt members of the security forces and political elite. Moreover, these same sources are quick to point out that, unlike the situations in Mindanao and Indonesia, there is no established expanse of rebel-held territory in Pattani, Yala, or Narathiwat that external extremists could actually use to institute a concerted regimen of international terrorist and doctrinal training.

Perhaps the clearest reason to believe that the southern Thai conflict has not metastasized into a broader jihadist struggle, however, is the fact that there has neither been a migration of violence north (much less to other parts of Southeast Asia), nor have there been directed attacks against foreigners, tourist resort areas (such as Phuket), or overt symbols of U.S. cultural capitalism (such as McDonalds, Starbucks, or the Hard Rock Cafe). Indeed, there appears to have been a deliberate, strategic decision on the part of militants on the ground to explicitly not tie the Malay cause to wider Islamic anti-Western or secular designs for fear that this will both undermine the perceived credibility of their local commitment (and thereby threaten popular support) as well as prompt the international community to crack down on the insurgency as a manifestation of panregional jihadist extremism. In the words of Kasturi Mahkota, the self-defined foreign-affairs spokesperson of PULO, "There is no interest in taking operations to Bangkok or Phuket. We do not need to be on anyone's terrorist list. Once we are on that list, it is all over"

While there is no indication yet that southern Thailand has metastasized into a new front for global jihad, are there any conditions under which such a transformation could take place? In answering this question, it is useful to consider the issue from the perspective of both local insurgents and outside extremists.

With regard to the former, there are conceivably two situations that might cause the rebels to redefine their objectives from local autonomy to more-grandiose regional or international designs. First would be the influx of a cadre of influential religious radicals who had been

Talibanized abroad and who manage to persuade a sufficient number of their brethren at home that the best way to reenergize the southern Thai struggle is to make it more relevant to the Muslim world by specifically linking the conflict to broader Islamist goals. A precedent for such a transformation does exist in the guise of ASG, which, under the combined leadership of Khaddafy Janjalani and Jainal Antel Sali (both now dead), between 2004 and 2007 progressively sought to cultivate its image as a bona fide jihadist organization committed to transborder imperatives. It is also worth noting that periodic reports arise of fraternization between Thai Muslims, the Taliban, and remnants of al Qaeda in Pakistan. Assuming that these contacts are helping to foster greater motivation and feeling for Islamic solidarity, it is conceivable that these same individuals could act as a conduit for exporting similar sentiments to Bangkok's deep south.

Second would be a change in existing bilateral military cooperation arrangements between Thailand and the United States. If these were to result in increased foreign internal defense aid that was then used to step up Royal Thai Army (RTA) operations in the southern border provinces, they could well prompt rebels on the ground to conceive their enemy in far as well as near terms. Such a cognitive shift would be especially likely to arise should another Krue Se-type of incident take place under conditions of enhanced Thai-U.S. security collaboration. As one religious elder remarked to this author during interviews in Pattani,

There is a general awareness of issues currently going on in the Middle East and concern about U.S. policies in the region. However, these [actions] are not impacting on our unique way of life. But if any outside group [in this context, the United States] tried to come in and threaten our religion, we would rise up against them—naturally.

Turning to the latter, any change of the sort discussed here would be liable to resonate with external militant strategic calculations as the potential scope for co-opting local insurgent support would be that much greater. It is unlikely that outside Islamists would pass up an opportunity of this sort. Indeed, Thailand's free-wheeling capitalist economy and willingness to cater to Western decadence make it a logical target for jihadist aggression. Moreover, because there is not a sizable Muslim province outside the southern Malay provinces, far more functional latitude is available for carrying out large-scale assaults without the attendant risk of these affecting wider Islamic interests (something that has negatively affected JI in Indonesia). Put simply, an already amenable local rebel context would provide transregional terrorists with an ideal vehicle for carrying out "justifiable" acts of indiscriminate civilian violence that could then levered to operationalize a new hub for southeast-Asian extremism.

A tactical decision by outsiders to radicalize and gain the upper hand in southern Thailand could also occur in the event that other operational environments in Southeast Asia become less accessible. An intensified legal crackdown on domestic extremist elements in Indonesia could certainly precipitate moves in this direction. And should theater conditions in Mindanao decisively change—either as a result of a peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) or as a by-product of the U.S.-Philippine Balikatan (literally "shoulder-to-shoulder") exercises—groups, such as JI, might very well be forced to reevaluate the relative utility of this region in comparison to such areas as Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat.

Government Response: The Thaksin Administration

It is only since 2004 that the Thai government moved to develop a concerted strategy for dealing with the conflict in the south. Prior to this, the central administration tended to portray unrest in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat largely as an issue of law and order, which—while periodically serious in its manifestation—was one that could be essentially dealt with through the normal recourse to police and judicial channels. Between 2004 and 2006, however, the growing tempo and scale of violence forced Bangkok to confront the reality that it faced an entrenched Islamo-separatist insurgency in the south and that more directed action was needed. The thrust of the ensuing response saw a more conspicuous deployment of the army as well as a growing presence of specialist paramilitary police units and civil-defense militias.

During Thaksin's rule, 24,000 security-force personnel were deployed in the south, 10,000 from the Royal Thai Police (RTP), 10,000 from the RTA's 4th Command (who are rotated on an annual basis), and 4,000 from the newly created 15th Light Infantry Division, which will act as a permanently deployed force for the Malay border provinces. Several specialized squads were also active in the region, including, from the RTP, the Police Special Task Force and the Police Border Patrol (which operationally falls under the army) and, from the RTA, detachments from the Special Warfare Command Center and the Santhi Suk Force (as a dedicated psychological-operation unit). Supplementing these professional combat teams were 5,000 paramilitary rangers (due to expand to 8,000 by 2009), 2,200 full-time village defense units (known as Or Sor), 67,400 part-time village defense volunteers (known as Chor Ror Bor), a separate contingent of 9,541 village defense volunteers sponsored by the queen (known as Or Bor Chor), and a 1,400-strong teacher-protection battalion (which is scheduled to be expanded to around 2,840 by 2009).

For the most part, the preferred policy of the Thaksin government was to confront the insurgents with directed force rather than to seek a negotiated political settlement to the conflict. In 2004, the 4th Army established a forward headquarters—complete with five company-sized task forces backed by attack and transport helicopters—to help coordinate military operations throughout the southern border provinces. That same year, martial law was imposed across Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, allowing troops to make arrests without a court warrant and extending their rights of search and preemptive detention. 3,600 members of the RTP also received dedicated training in small-team tactics, long-range reconnaissance, and siege tactics, extending their traditionally community-oriented defensive role to one that has a far more explicitly offensive character.

Several interrelated factors greatly hindered the effectiveness of the military approach. First, the government's response suffered from an extremely weak intelligence infrastructure. Symptomatic of a wider malaise in the Thai security community, the inability to first gather and then collate information into an actionable product reflects several institutional and personnel problems:

- a complete lack of trust both between and within police and military ranks, with interagency rivalries, jurisdictional conflicts, and data stovepiping more the rule than the exception
- the absence of a viable central mechanism to coordinate the intelligence activities of the numerous agencies on the ground

- insufficient training, particularly in terms of analytical techniques (in this sense, the 2002 dissolution of the SBPAC, which did perform a useful analysis role, proved to be extremely costly)
- inadequate linguistic preparation—very few Thai Buddhists posted to the south possessed even a basic (let alone working) knowledge of the Malay dialect.

Second, the hard military track was not accompanied by a softer, more nuanced policy line to win popular support. The Thai government made virtually no effort to address the poverty, underdevelopment, and general alienation that fuels Malay-Muslim discontent, paying scant attention to educational, cultural, and economic initiatives that could build community trust. As one Western diplomat remarked,

Bangkok does not appear to be overwhelmingly concerned with looking at new ways of solving the southern conflict, always defaulting to a position of brute force. [Measures] such as expanding Malay-Muslim education in state-run schools remain at marginal levels while pledges to institute civic [infrastructure] and development projects have yet to translate into meaningful action.

Third, the security forces engaged in several actions that fundamentally destroyed their perceived legitimacy among the wider civic population. In the opinion of most local commentators, it was not so much that indigenous Malays actively supported the insurgents or shared their aspiration for an independent state; it was just that they feared and resented the police and military more. Two incidents, in particular, are universally recognized as having had an especially serious impact in terms of engendering negative public sentiments. First was the April 2004 storming of one of the most revered Islamic religious sites in Southeast Asia, the Krue Se mosque. The assault left an indelible mark on the local Muslim psyche, impressing a perception of the RTA as little more than an uncaring, outside occupier. Second was the highly brutal manner by which the military dealt with a Malay protest in the Tak Bai district of Narathiwat province seven months later. Not only was the crowd fired on with live ammunition, some 1,300 demonstrators were subsequently rounded up and stacked in trucks up to five or six layers deep for transport to an RTA detention camp. By the time the vehicles arrived at their destination, 78 of the demonstrators had died of asphyxiation, and several dozen others had broken or dislocated limbs or were suffering from serious dehydration.

Finally, there was no strategic framework to guide the RTA and RTP and ensure that their actions were instrumental in providing for the full stabilization in the south. In many ways, Thai authorities remained blind to the evolving nature of the Malay-Muslim insurgency, believing only what they wanted to believe (namely that the current crop of rebels is no different from those of the past) and conceiving of victory not so much in terms of true national reconciliation as merely capping violence by returning to the old status quo. This attitude was perhaps best reflected in the following analogy given by one senior official serving in Pattani to a Western diplomat in Bangkok: “I look at the deep south like an old broken-down car; while it can be fixed, it will still be an old car. Right now all we are trying to do is to get the south back to where it was. This is not a fully stable region, but at least [it is] one that is functioning.”

Assessment

The situation in southern Thailand remains highly worrying. The scope and tempo of violence continue to register at extremely high levels (as do popular perceptions of marginalization and discrimination), and rebels on the ground are demonstrating a proven and more consistent ability to carry out large-scale, coordinated attacks. Although there does not appear to be a concerted overall strategic agenda driving the insurgency, most commentators agree that militants are actively seeking to drive a wedge between Muslims and Buddhists to make the southern border provinces as ungovernable as possible and that their actions in this regard are fundamentally altering the social fabric of the region and eroding prospects for economic and wider civic development.

Compounding matters has been the nature of Bangkok's response to the insurgency, which has essentially attempted to solve the problem at its end rather than at the root. The conflict revolves around perceptions of ethnoreligious alienation, discrimination, and marginalization, and these cannot be defeated by force. The key will be to change the mindset of the communities in the south—to foster peaceful coexistence between Buddhist Thais and Malay Muslims. This will require a far more nuanced and multifaceted civic educational-oriented approach than the central government has traditionally been prepared to enact. Just as important, it is essential that Thailand's other 73 provinces appreciate that assimilation policies dictated by Bangkok will never work in the southern border provinces and accept that the local (Islamic) communities in Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani will accept their integration into the country's wider polity only if they are allowed to do so on their own terms.

Despite its seriousness, there is no indication (yet) that the insurgency is on the verge of morphing into a mass-based conflict. Although Malay Muslims are certainly resentful of the Thai presence, the bulk of the local population does not seem to want an independent state and largely rejects the extreme and arbitrary nature of militant attacks. The one factor that could change this dynamic would be a major crackdown by the security forces that results in large scale casualties or a resumption of (pro-Buddhist) cultural integrationist policies.

There is also currently little evidence to suggest that southern Thailand is emerging as a new front for transnational jihadism. The focus of local militants remains firmly fixed on specific Malay-Muslim concerns, and they certainly have not shown any interest in extending their ideological or tactical agenda to take on a broader national or regional footing. As noted, this dynamic could change in reaction to the influx of cadres indoctrinated abroad or as a result of U.S.-Thai security cooperation. At the time of this writing, however, neither scenario seemed probable. The indigenous population—including elements that harbor extremist tendencies—jealously guards its own distinct religious self-identity and, thus, tends to be highly suspicious of externally propagated suggestions that there might be a better way. Also, Bangkok has consistently rejected any question of seeking outside assistance to help contain the southern insurgency, insisting that the matter is a purely internal affair that the government's own police and armed forces are perfectly capable of handling.

In the absence of a decisive shift in the thinking of local insurgents, there is little prospect that extremist entities, such as JI, will be able to radicalize Islamic sentiment in the Malay-Muslim border provinces for their own strategic purposes. Moreover, while changing conditions in Indonesia or the Philippines might prompt external militants to try to move independently into the south, the region's unique language, culture, and ethnic makeup would make it extremely difficult for them to establish a concerted operational presence under their own auspices.

Conclusion: Future Prospects

It remains to be seen how the new political environment that has been brought about in Thailand as a result of the September 2006 army coup and subsequent institution of a civilian-led government under the People's Power Party (PPP) will affect Bangkok's overall response to the insurgency. Encouragingly, General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, who orchestrated the military takeover and who was instrumental in appointing new members of an interim administration, immediately signaled that he was ready to negotiate with rebels in the south. Just as significant, his designated prime minister, Surayud Chulanont, issued a public apology for past hard-line government policies and, in November 2006, specifically affirmed that Islamic law should be given a bigger role in the south and explicitly recognized the need for a long-term strategy that combines three main strands: (1) reconciliation, (2) security (split 50/50 between hard and soft approaches), and (3) dialogue. These various gestures represented an abrupt change in tack from the policies of the previous Thaksin administration, which consistently refused to engage in talks with the insurgents, much less grant them concessions. At the time of this writing, this broad-based policy mix remained in place under the PPP.

There are several immediate measures that the present government could usefully undertake to fully capitalize on this promising start, including

- working with local Muslim leaders to proactively identify and manage communal-religious tensions and flash points before they erupt
- prioritizing the development of sustainable conflict-resolution mechanisms that are adequately equipped to address both real and perceived Malay-Muslim grievances
- coupling hard COIN approaches with more-explicit components that focus on human rights training, socioeconomic development, furthering harmonious civil-military relations, and fostering a better understanding of rules of engagement
- spearheading public diplomacy, exchange, and educational efforts to foster greater cultural and ethnic awareness between Muslims and non-Muslims in the south, including members of the security forces

If vigorously pursued, these types of nuanced, balanced measures could provide a viable foundation for more appropriately identifying, understanding, and rectifying the drivers underpinning the current conflict. However, if the military merely returns to its traditional default position of "might is right," there is a genuine chance that an already aggrieved local population may decide to throw in its lot with the insurgents, abandon its hitherto preference for autonomy, and support outright secessionism.

Security analysts often talk about a "tipping point" when assessing future prospects for stability and peace. There is a sense that the insurgency in southern Thailand is fast approaching such a juncture and that 2008 will be a critical year for determining its outcome: Either the conflict will be contained, or it will be allowed to simply spiral out of control.

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Ethnic Separatism in Southern Thailand: Kingdom Fraying at the Edge?

Dr. Ian Storey

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Overview

- Since January 2004 separatist violence in Thailand's three Muslim-majority southern provinces has claimed the lives of nearly 1,900 people.
- The root causes of this latest phase of separatist violence are a complex mix of history, ethnicity, and religion, fueled by socio-economic disparities, poor governance, and political grievances. Observers differ on the role of radical Islam in the south, though the general consensus is that transnational terrorist groups are not involved.
- A clear picture of the insurgency is rendered difficult by the multiplicity of actors, and by the fact that none of the groups involved has articulated clear demands. What is apparent, however, is that the overall aim of the insurgents is the establishment of an independent Islamic state comprising the three provinces.
- The heavy-handed and deeply flawed policies of the Thaksin government during 2004-2006 deepened the trust deficit between Malay-Muslims and the Thai authorities and fueled separatist sentiment.
- Post-coup, the Thai authorities have made resolving violence in the south a priority, and promised to improve governance and conduct a more effective counter-insurgency campaign.
- Despite the emphasis on national reconciliation, violence in the south has escalated dramatically post-coup. Although the Thai government predicts that the violence will be contained within six months, few observers share this optimism, and many expect that the violence will increase during 2007.
- The United States is constrained in its ability to assist Thailand, as the presence of U.S. military advisers would likely exacerbate the problem. The United States should, however, encourage the Thai authorities to improve good governance in the south, and pass on counter-insurgency lessons learned from American experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Roots of the Problem

On Jan. 4, 2004 militants raided an army barracks in Narathiwat Province, killing four soldiers and stealing over 400 weapons. Militants also burned down 20 schools in the area, attacked police posts, and detonated several bombs. These attacks marked the beginning of the latest, and most violent, phase of Thailand's southern insurgency. The conflict has now claimed nearly 1,900 lives and without doubt poses the most serious challenge to Thailand's internal stability.

The root causes of the problem are a complex mix of history, ethnicity, and religion, fueled by socio-economic disparities, poor governance, and political grievances. The three southern provinces wracked by violence, Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani, originally formed part of an

independent entity called the Pattani Kingdom which was slowly subsumed by the Thai state (then called Siam) from the late 18th century onwards. Two Anglo-Siamese treaties in 1902 and 1909 resulted in the formal incorporation of the three provinces into Thailand, while the rest of the Pattani Kingdom became part of British Malaya. The majority of the population of Thailand's three newest provinces were Malay-Muslims: ethnic Malays who spoke Malayu and adhered to Islam. Beginning in the 1920s the Thai government initiated a policy of forced assimilation with the aim of turning these Malay-Muslims into Thai-Muslims. In reaction, an armed separatist movement emerged in the early 1960s that campaigned for a separate homeland for Malay-Muslims. By the late 1980s, however, the Thai authorities had essentially defeated the separatist insurgency in the south through a combination of improved governance, economic development projects, blanket amnesties for the insurgents, and stepped-up security cooperation with neighboring Malaysia.

By 2000, however, separatist sentiment had reemerged in the south. Many of the causes were the same as before. Malay-Muslims felt politically marginalized by Bangkok, and perceived that their ethnic, cultural, and religious identity was under threat from the predominantly Buddhist Thai state. The population felt deprived of the socio-economic and educational opportunities afforded to other parts of the country. Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani are among some of the poorest provinces in Thailand, with high numbers of unemployed, young Muslim males. Educational standards are low, which means that few Malay-Muslims can pass the entrance exams for government positions, including the local police. These positions are invariably taken by Thais from outside the region who do not speak the local language nor understand the cultural mores. This breeds frustration and resentment among the local population. The police have a particularly poor record of community policing in the south, and are widely perceived as corrupt, incompetent, and able to abuse their authority with impunity.

While some observers have put the accent on ethno-nationalism as the primary driver of the current insurgency, with religion accorded very much a secondary position, this is, in reality, a false dichotomy: Islam cannot be separated from Malay identity. That said, however, most commentators would agree that the religious element of the current insurgency is becoming more pronounced. Thus, according to Joseph Liow, Islam increasingly serves as a "potent avenue to comprehend, rally, articulate, and express resistance against the central state". What adds credence to this view is that much of the violence being perpetrated today is Muslim against Muslim, whereas in the early stage of the insurgency it was Thai-Buddhist versus Malay-Muslim.

The growing sectarian nature of the conflict calls into question the role of radical Islam and the involvement of outside groups such as Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Here scholars are divided. Liow argues that the violence is primarily rooted in local grievances rather than radical Islamist ideology. He supports this contention by pointing out that the southern militants' rhetoric does not make calls for worldwide jihad, that Western interests in Thailand have not been targeted, and that the insurgents have not resorted to suicide attacks. Zachary Abuza, on the other hand, posits that the violence has radical jihadist overtones, and that the conflict is as much about the insurgents wanting to impose hardline Salafism on the Malay-Muslim population as it is about secession.

Most observers would agree that transnational terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and JI have played no operational role in the conflict thus far. According to sources who spoke with the author, JI operatives offered assistance to southern Thai militant groups during 2002-2003, but these offers were rejected because of differences over targets (JI wanted to attack Western targets in Bangkok) and because the southern separatists do not see the creation of a pan-Islamic

caliphate in Southeast Asia as their end game. The facts that the insurgency has been going well for the militants since 2004 without outside help, and that JI is currently preoccupied with re-establishing its power base in Indonesia, militates against JI involvement for the immediate future. Malay-Muslim militants are likely, however, to have been *influenced* by radical Islamic websites, and have also copied tactics, such as the use of improvised explosive devices (IED) and decapitation, from insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, a major concern for security practitioners in Thailand is that if the violence continues, JI or other groups will become involved, as jihadists have done with other conflicts in Chechnya, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia.

The Insurgents: Origins, Aims, and Tactics

The current phase of the insurgency seems to have incubated in the south's religious schools (*pondocks*) during the 1990s. When the Thai government offered blanket amnesties in 1984 and 1993, a minority spurned this offer and took up positions in the *pondocks*; these schools provided them a forum to teach young Malay-Muslims about Pattani nationalism and perceived injustices perpetrated by the Thai state. These teachers inspired a new generation to resist Thai authority. By 2000, their students were in their late teens or early twenties and ready to fight; 2001-2003 witnessed a gradual rise in small-scale attacks against symbols of the Thai state, with a major escalation of violence beginning in January 2004.

Although many groups are involved and none has claimed responsibility for the violence, there is general consensus among security practitioners in Thailand that two groups are responsible for the majority of attacks. The first group is the Barisan Revolusi Nasional–Koordinasi (BRN-C) and its armed wing Runda Kumpulan Kecil (RKK). The second, smaller group is Gerakan Mujahideen Islami Pattani (GMIP). Both groups are said to meet on a regular basis to coordinate attacks in the three provinces. The rank and file of the insurgents are typically young males in their 20s or 30s, many of whom have attended religious schools in Thailand or overseas. The number of insurgents is difficult to ascertain, though the Royal Thai Army (RTA) estimates 1,500 active insurgents and 8,000-10,000 supporters.

To date, none of the insurgent groups has articulated any demands. Their overriding goal, however, would seem to be the establishment of an independent Islamic state incorporating the three southern provinces. It is possible that factions within the various groups might settle for genuine autonomy, at least as the first stage toward independence. In order to achieve independent statehood, hardcore groups such as BRN-C and GMIP have adopted two main strategies. The first is to shatter the fabric of society in the south, polarize society, force Thai-Buddhists to migrate, and destroy Thailand's governmental structure in the south. To date, the militants have achieved a high degree of success. According to Abuza, Thai officials estimate that 30,000 Thai-Buddhists (ten percent of their population) have fled the south over the past three years. The insurgents have also been quite successful in targeting the symbols of Thai authority, especially police, army, and government officials. The militants have singled out schools, not only because they represent a soft target, but also because they are perceived as places where Malay-Muslim children are "brainwashed" to accept Thai authority. Since January 2004, insurgents have killed 64 teachers and torched 72 schools. The second strategy is the establishment of an alternative governance structure in the south – known in the lexicon of counter-insurgency as a counterstate. In December 2006 the *Bangkok Post* reported that separatist groups were planning to form an alternative government for the Islamic Pattani State, which included their own flag.

Since January 2004 the violence has largely been confined to Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, though several attacks have occurred in neighboring Songkla Province. After the 2006 New Year's Eve bombings in Bangkok which killed three people and injured 38, suspicion immediately fell on southern militants. The Thai government, however, was quick to dismiss their involvement, instead blaming elements still loyal to deposed Prime Minister Thaksin. The government ruled out southern separatists in the belief that they lack the organizational, operational, and financial resources to conduct attacks outside their home provinces. Unconfirmed reports, however, suggest Malay-Muslims have conducted reconnaissance missions on shopping malls and airports in Bangkok and Phuket, albeit very amateurish ones. And in February 2007, a senior Thai police official said they were looking for a suspect in connection with the bomb blasts who may have links to the southern insurgency.

State Responses

State Responses under the Thaksin Administration, 2001-2006

State responses to the upsurge in separatist violence under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who held office between January 2001 and September 2006, were, in the main, heavy-handed and deeply flawed, and served only to fuel the violence and increase the distrust between Malay-Muslims and the Thai authorities.

The Thaksin administration's first error of judgment was to misdiagnose the problem and then, based on that faulty assessment, dismantle the security apparatus that had helped keep the peace for over a decade. Although an increase in shootings and bombings in 2001-2002 suggested separatist sentiment was on the rise, Thaksin dismissed the violence as simply a turf war between rival criminal gangs. In 2002, believing that separatism was no longer an issue in the south, Thaksin abolished the Southern Border Provinces Administration Center (SBPAC) and the Civilian-Military-Police Taskforce 43 (CMP-43). The SBPAC and CMP-43 had been established in the early 1980s and were key elements in the Thai government's successful counter-insurgency campaign. The SBPAC, staffed largely by local officials, essentially governed the three provinces, oversaw economic development projects, and resolved grievances between Malay-Muslim and government officials. CMP-43 coordinated all security operations in the south and worked closely with the SBPAC. These two organizations, plus two blanket amnesties for insurgents in 1984 and 1993, are widely credited with taking the heat out of the insurgency in the 1980s and early 1990s. In their place, Thaksin (a former Lieutenant-Colonel in the police force) transferred responsibility for security in the south from the army to the police. Furious at the loss of prestige, the army ended all cooperation with the police. The police, never a popular agency in the south due to its poor human rights record, initiated a shoot-to-kill policy under the guise of Thaksin's 2003 "war on drugs". During this campaign the police executed many former insurgent operatives who had become government informers, depriving the security services of their "eyes and ears" on the ground.

When major violence erupted in January 2004, the Thaksin administration could no longer ignore the problem and immediately adopted a hardline military-security response. Bangkok declared martial law in the south, and dispatched 10,000 soldiers to join the 20,000 already stationed there. During 2004 the government's heavy-handed response resulted in two major atrocities. On April 28, a group of young militants armed with machetes attacked police and army posts in Pattani, and then took refuge in the Krue Se mosque. The army stormed the religious sanctuary, gunning down all 31 militants. By the end of the day, 108 militants and five security personnel lay dead. The second incident took place on October 25 in the town of Tak Bai, Narathiwat Province. Soldiers opened fire on protestors who had surrounded a local police station and then

herded hundreds of them into cramped army trucks for transportation to an army camp five hours drive away. During that journey 78 males suffocated to death. Government commissions investigated the Krue Se and Tak Bai incidents and concluded that excessive force had been used, and that those responsible should be brought to justice. However, to date, no one has been charged, and the commander of the Tak Bai operation was moved out of the area and promoted.

Other state responses also helped fuel separatist sentiment. In February 2005 the government announced that the south would be divided into red, yellow, and green zones; red zones contained villages deemed to be supporting the insurgents and would be denied government funding. This policy was widely condemned. In July 2005, following a series of bombings in Yala, the government replaced martial law with an Emergency Decree. This new measure moved decision-making away from military commanders to the prime minister, giving the security services immunity from prosecution the power to search and make arrests without warrants and to hold suspects for seven days without charge. The new measure was perceived in the south as handing the security forces a license to kill. Inter-agency rivalry during this period, especially between the army and police, rendered state responses ineffective.

Not all state responses under Thaksin were as heavy-handed. In March 2005, in response to domestic and international pressure following the Tak Bai Incident, Thaksin appointed a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The NRC, composed of security practitioners, politicians, and community and religious leaders, delivered its report in June 2006 after conducting extensive consultations in the three southern provinces. Its recommendations included, *inter alia*, the need to right past injustices, encourage greater participation by Malay-Muslims in decision-making bodies, and allow the use of the local dialect as a working language by government officials. By this point, however, Thaksin was preoccupied with the political crisis that eventually led to his ouster, and basically ignored the report's recommendations. In another attempt to achieve peace, the Thaksin government gave the nod to secret talks with the exiled leaders of separatist organizations that had been active from the 1960s until the late 1980s, such as the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), and Bersatu. The talks, which took place in Langkawi, Malaysia in 2005-2006 and were brokered by former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, produced a vague plan of action. What was clear to several analysts then, however, and something that the Thai security forces now accept, is that the leaders of these exiled groups have absolutely no influence or control over militants on the ground. As such, the talks were a failure.

The Thaksin government's heavy-handed response to the violence not only exacerbated separatist sentiment, but also strained relations with Thailand's Muslim-majority neighbors, especially Malaysia. In late 2004 Bangkok incensed Kuala Lumpur with unfounded allegations that Muslim-Malay militants had established training camps in Kelantan State across the border. Moreover, human rights abuses perpetrated by the Thai security forces hampered security cooperation between the two countries and aroused sympathy among Malays, particularly those living in the country's northern states.

State Responses Post-Sept. 19, 2006

On Sept. 19, 2006, the head of the armed forces, General Sonthi Boonyaratakin, ousted the Thaksin government in a bloodless coup. The armed forces established the Council for National Security (CNS) and appointed a former general, Surayud Chulanont, as interim prime minister. The CNS promised fresh elections within the year. A major change of policy was expected, as Sonthi is a practicing Muslim and had differed with Thaksin over the need to hold talks with the insurgents. Moreover, both Sonthi and Surayud were Special Forces operatives, and had

participated in counter-insurgency operations against the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) during the Cold War. As such, both men understand how the Thai armed forces had framed a successful counter-insurgency strategy in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Surayud government made resolving the problem in the south a priority, and took a number of important steps toward that end in the wake of the coup. Surayud adopted a more conciliatory tone than his predecessor, and promised to establish a constructive dialogue with “all concerned parties.” The prime minister said he would use the recommendations made by the NRC as “guideposts,” patch up relations with Malaysia, and even consider the partial implementation of Sharia law in the south. Surayud also recognized the importance of improving governance, socio-economic development, and educational standards in the south. On his first visit to the south, Surayud took the symbolically important step of apologizing for the excesses of the previous government, including the Tak Bai Incident. Soon afterwards, the government dropped all remaining charges against the Tak Bai protestors. Surayud also promised to make Thai officials more accountable for their actions, and investigate past abuses.

In terms of economic development, the new government has tried to kick-start the economy by designating the three southern provinces (plus Satun and Songkla) as a special economic zone, with tax incentives for those willing to invest in the area. The government also announced plans to revive the 1993 Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle which covers all five provinces. In a bid to improve educational standards, the Surayud government plans to increase the number of scholarships available for Malay-Muslims to attend university. How effective these initiatives will be remains open to question. As long as the violence continues, businessmen are unlikely to perceive the south as a hospitable investment environment. And the university scholarship program is unlikely to raise educational standards significantly when the real problem lies in the provision of primary and secondary education.

Since the coup the new government has made significant progress in mending ties with neighboring countries, especially Malaysia. Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi has praised Surayud’s “more diplomatic” approach to the restive south. On the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in January 2007 the two leaders agreed to reconvene annual talks and to push forward with the Joint Development Strategy, which is designed to foster economic integration between Thailand’s southern provinces and Malaysia’s northern states. When Surayud visited Jakarta in November 2006 he praised the peace process in Aceh as a model Thailand should emulate.

As mentioned above, both Sonthi and Surayud are veterans of the campaign against the CPT, and after the coup, some of the counter-insurgency structures adopted were employed during that era. This includes re-establishing the SBPAC and CMP-43. However, when the SBPAC was formally stood up on Jan. 3, 2007, bureaucratic inertia and budgetary issues left it understaffed and not fully operational. In an attempt to stamp out inter-agency rivalry and improve command and control, the CNS reinvigorated and increased the powers of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), an organization established in the late 1960s to better manage and coordinate Thailand’s counter-insurgency campaign against the CPT. ISOC’s immediate task is to resolve inter-agency rivalry in the south. The government has also resurrected the use in the south of Rangers, locally recruited militias whose job it is to protect townships and combat insurgents.

It was hoped that the Surayud government’s change of tone, emphasis on national reconciliation, and adoption of new strategies would result in decreasing levels of violence in the south. In actual fact, however, post-coup the number of assassinations, bombings, and arson attacks

increased dramatically. In November 2006, for example, there were 122 assassinations or attempted assassinations (80 people were murdered), up from 81 attacks in October, 64 in September, and 59 in August. Daily assassinations, bombings, and arson attacks have continued into 2007.

Several factors explain the increase in post-coup violence. First, the insurgents are seeking to discredit the conciliatory policies of the new government. Second, violent attacks are aimed at intimidating the population into non-cooperation with the Thai authorities. Third, the insurgents are sending a message to Bangkok that they do not care which group of “infidels” are in power, their goal remains the same: secession. Fourth, the escalation of attacks also reflects the insurgents’ growing confidence, numbers, and sophistication.

Although the Surayud government has offered to talk with the insurgents, this offer has been rebuffed. From the point of view of the insurgents, the campaign of violence is going well, and the security authorities have failed to make serious inroads against them. There is simply no incentive to engage in talks with the government. Moreover, the insurgents suspect that the government’s offer is simply a ruse to bring their leaders out into the open, after which they will be targeted for assassination.

Alternative Futures

With the new policies in place, the Thai government has confidently asserted that the level of violence in the south will return to pre-2004 levels during the course of 2007. Defense Minister Boonrawd Somthat has forecast that the security situation in the three restive provinces will improve dramatically by mid-2007, while Interior Minister Aree Wongsearayana made the astonishing prediction in late January 2007 that the violence would be contained within a month. Few observers in Thailand share this optimism, with most believing that the level of violence will actually escalate during 2007 for reasons outlined earlier. One NGO consultant with extensive experience in the south has predicted widespread communal and sectarian violence by midyear.

The general consensus of opinion among those who follow events in the south is that 2007 is the key year in terms of success or failure for the Surayud government. According to RTA estimates, less than two percent of Malay-Muslims are actively involved in the violence; the other 98 percent of the population, while they may have grievances with the Thai authorities, do not support violent measures. The aim of the Surayud government is to win the hearts and minds of this 98 percent during the course of 2007 through improved levels of governance, righting past injustices, and initiating socio-economic development projects. However, the goal of the insurgents is essentially the same: to win over the majority of the population, partly through fear and intimidation, and partly by demonstrating that the “infidels” in Bangkok are anti-Muslim and do not have the interests of the Malay-Muslims at heart.

The fear among some observers in Thailand is that the longer the violence continues, frustration levels among the security forces will rise, and the temptation to lash out will become uncontrollable, possibly resulting in serious human rights abuses of the kind which occurred at Tak Bai. The reimposition of heavy-handed tactics by the Thai security services will reinforce the insurgents’ claim that Bangkok is fundamentally anti-Muslim. Moreover, by further alienating Malay-Muslims, more recruits will be attracted to the separatists’ cause. For these reasons, therefore, it is likely that the insurgents will seek to provoke the security services in 2007.

To date, the political elite in Bangkok has rejected the idea of autonomy for the south as simply the first step toward outright independence. If the Thai authorities had considered granting genuine autonomy to the three southern provinces in 2004, or arguably even earlier, an escalation in violence might have been avoided. If, however, the violence continues to escalate, as seems likely, by the time the Thai authorities are willing to consider *genuine* autonomy, perhaps akin to Aceh, the insurgents will settle for nothing less than full independence. Given that Bangkok has absolutely ruled out the idea of secession, unless the central government can win the hearts and minds of Malay-Muslims while striking decisive blows against the insurgents, separatist violence will continue indefinitely.

Implications for the United States

The ongoing insurgency in southern Thailand has important implications for the United States as Washington has close defense, security, and economic ties with Bangkok, and Thailand is arguably America's most important partner in mainland Southeast Asia. The United States has obviously been concerned with the escalation of violence in the south since January 2004, and with the implications for Thailand's stability, its relations with neighboring countries, and the "war on terror." America was critical of the Thaksin government's heavy handed response to the violence during 2004-2006, noting that members of the security services had committed "serious human rights abuses." In 2005 the United States used stronger language, identifying arbitrary and unlawful killings by both the security forces and insurgents, torture and excessive use of force by police, and impunity for human rights abusers. Although Washington was concerned by the September coup and called for the quick restoration of full democracy in Thailand, it has welcomed the Surayud government's more conciliatory tone and its emphasis on improving governance in the south.

The United States acknowledges that there is no evidence of linkages between the insurgent groups and transnational terrorist groups. It shares the concern of the Thai security forces, however, that the longer the violence continues, the greater the likelihood that groups such as Al Qaeda or JI will graft themselves onto the situation and southern Thailand will become part of the global jihadist movement. Such a development would be a severe setback for America's global counter-terrorism efforts. Washington was also perturbed by the deterioration in Thailand's relations with Malaysia under Thaksin, and obviously welcomes improved ties between two of its most important friends in the region.

The United States is somewhat constrained in its ability to assist Thailand. Bangkok would undoubtedly reject any offer of U.S. Special Forces advisers on the ground, such as there are in Mindanao in the Philippines, for fear of inflaming the situation. A widespread conspiracy theory in the south is that the United States is orchestrating the violence as a pretext to military intervention; the presence of U.S. troops would simply reinforce that conspiracy theory. The United States should encourage Bangkok to improve good governance in the south and pass on counter-insurgency lessons learned from its experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, post-coup the United States was forced to suspend some military aid to Thailand, including counter-terrorism aid, because the armed forces had ousted a democratically elected government in September 2006. A return to full democracy in Thailand will, therefore, expedite U.S.-Thai counter-insurgency cooperation.

Notes

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Despite Concerns, Thailand Insurgency Stays Local

Brian McCartan

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After more than five years, Thailand's Muslim insurgency shows no signs of abating. But neither is there any sign of it expanding or joining the ranks of international terrorism. Instead it remains localized, which is where the Thai government hopes it will remain.

Some security analysts had been concerned about the possibility of connections to al-Qaida-linked extremist groups, especially the Indonesian-based Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). JI was responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings that killed 202 people on the resort island, and is dedicated to establishing an Islamic state encompassing Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, the southern Philippines and southern Thailand.

The group was thought to have been gravely hurt by Indonesian counterterrorism operations, having launched no major attacks since 2005. But the bombing on July 17 of the J.W. Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta propelled it back into the spotlight.

JI's military leader -- Riduan Isamuddin, better known as Hambali -- was arrested in a joint U.S.-Thai operation in the city of Ayutthaya, north of Bangkok, in 2003. Although he was plotting terror attacks in Southeast Asia, including in Bangkok, no connection has been established between him and Thailand's southern insurgents.

Security analysts, Thai government and military officials and local southerners all agree that the aims of Muslim militants in the south remain grounded in local issues. While the occasional militant slogan or distributed tract may be couched in global jihadist terms, insurgent objectives are aimed at localized autonomy, government guarantees of justice and respect for local culture, institution of Shariah law and, at their most extreme, an independent Pattani state.

While the insurgency in the South has been brutal and involves the killings of security forces, government officials -- including teachers -- and both Buddhist and Muslim civilians, almost all targets have been in the three southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. The exceptions to date have been several bomb attacks in the southern city of Hat Yai in adjacent Songkhla province between 2006 and 2008. A Canadian killed in a 2006 bombing remains the only Westerner killed as a result of the insurgency.

Locations heavily frequented by Westerners, such as the tourist resorts in Phuket, have never been attacked. Neither have Thai government offices or commercial districts in Bangkok or other cities and towns with large Muslim populations.

Thai government and intelligence officials maintain that this is because there are so far no concrete connections between international terrorism and the south. Although some Muslim youths may have come into contact with extremists during their studies abroad in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia or Egypt, there is no evidence that those contacts have been maintained or operationally developed.

Security officers do concede that some circumstantial evidence exists for such a link, such as ambush techniques and bomb-making skills. However, they caution, these skills could just as easily have been learned from news reports out of Iraq and Afghanistan or from the Internet.

Col. Parinya Chaidilok, spokesman for the Internal Operations Security Command overseeing counterinsurgency in the South, told World Politics Review that although the military had received some information about training, it still had no evidence. Other military officers said improvements in the insurgents' skills were due to simple experience.

An example of this was a July 17 bomb that exploded in a parked pickup truck, killing a Thai Army major and his aid, and wounding four other soldiers. A two-way radio was used to trigger the bomb when the soldiers' jeep passed. Security officers on the scene said it was a new technique for the insurgents. But they were quick to add that the information needed to rig it is readily available on the Internet. Security analysts in Bangkok say the technique has long been used in Iraq, and that it was only a matter of time before it was used here.

Although this attack was labeled a "car bomb," a Thai Army officer noted that "a car bomb and a bomb in a car are not the same." Speaking on condition of anonymity, he said that militants still have a long way to go before they are likely to deploy suicide bombers. But the possibility cannot be ignored, and security forces are on their guard.

A more likely form of outside assistance than operational training, say Thai army officers, is financial support. According to Col. Parinya, "We have some information about support money from abroad. It is not exactly money going to an [insurgent] organization. The money goes to support an above-ground Muslim organization. Where it goes after that is difficult to say."

According to other sources, a trickle of money comes in from individuals in Malaysia, the Middle East and Europe, but it is difficult to trace.

Security analysts in Bangkok say future connections to international terrorist networks cannot be ruled out. But until those connections are proven, Thai officials are treating the insurgency as an internal affair, albeit with a watchful eye for foreign involvement.

Note: This article from 31 August 2009 can be found on the World Politics Review Web site at <<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com>>.

**Commander Interview: MGEN Juancho M. Sabban,
Commander, Philippine Task Force Comet, Camp Bautista,
Jolo Island, Philippines, 8 September 2008**

**LTC Chadwick W. Clark, Center for Army Lessons Learned
Theater Observation Detachment Officer**

Date: 8 September 2008

How would you characterize the counterinsurgency environment in the Sulu Archipelago?

- The environment is different on each island. On Basilan, it is 40 percent Christian and 60 percent Muslim. Basilan is much more Western in its culture than Jolo.¹ There are many more investors on Basilan than on Jolo.
- On Jolo, it is 95 percent Muslim and 5 percent Christian, so there is a different dynamic. The Sulu Archipelago was the first real civilization in the Republic of the Philippines, trading with the Chinese and others in the 12th and 13th centuries. There was a sultanate who governed at that time, and there was a large Chinese population in Sulu.²
- You also have to consider the tribal culture in the islands. Tausûgs are experienced sailors and are known for their colorful boats or *vintas*. They also are very warlike and violent. They believe that at times piracy and kidnapping are acceptable. So, we are working against some tribal culture when we are trying to stop people from things their tribal society says are acceptable.

How do you train your units to effectively operate in this counterinsurgency environment?

- Starting out with small-unit tactics and improving individual skills like rifle marksmanship. We also incorporate leader training so they will be able to make better decisions and how to think in a very dynamic environment.
- Forces must consider things like collateral damage, destruction of civilian property, and violation of human rights; these all could be reasons why we would lose if leaders do not consider them. We want our soldiers and marines to be respected and set the example for others to follow. We have to regain the respect that we've lost in the past. We must force our soldiers and marines to be disciplined, to do good for the people. Respect begets respect.
- It is too easy for the military to win here. We are paid, trained, equipped, backed by the government, and serve the people. These are things the insurgents do not have. How can we lose against an enemy that terrorizes the people? We just have to have more will to win. In the end, it is a scramble for the masses similar to an election campaign. Ultimately, the government offers a better way of life, the insurgents do not.

What is the best way to fight the insurgents in Sulu?

- Get the people on your side. From what we are doing, I can see that we are winning over about 60 percent of the population. Civic leaders are seeing the differences we are making. They are coming to us and asking for assistance in rebuilding their roads and schools.
- As a commander here, you need to be respected, and I have a reputation with the people. My reputation as a commander has spread among the people by word of mouth, so the enemy fears and respects me because of the many battles I've fought. As a company commander in Palawan, I learned the value of intelligence and especially how to infiltrate the enemy. Three people were being held hostage by the MNLF [Moro National Liberation Front]. I was able to infiltrate a camp of 60 MNLF with 25 marines, rescue the hostages, and basically put an end to the MNLF insurgency on Palawan.
- I also used the indigenous people as local experts. They were so in tune with their environment that they could smell people at 500 meters. They could notice changes in their environment. We were traveling with a local, and he saw some birds fly. He could tell by the way they were flying there was something coming down the trail we were on. We moved off the road and waited. A half hour later, a man with his son and a *carabao* came down the trail. Another person who was with us on a patrol in Palawan said that he could hear music and smell smoke; a kilometer away, the MNLF security guard were watching TV and smoking. The indigenous people are very aware of their surroundings and must be used to combat the insurgents.
- In the early days of combating the MNLF and ASG [Abu Sayyaf Group], the insurgents capitalized on the mistakes of the military through the exploitation of collateral damage and civilians that were killed and made good use of information operations. Now the AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines] is very sensitive to that, and we try to make use of positive information engagement.
- As a commander, in order to prepare myself, I do a lot of reading. As a junior officer, I read about tactics, not about strategy. Now I am reading about strategy by studying Ariel Sharon, Benjamin Netanyahu, Rommel, Anwar Sadat, and Nasser. Also, I think that I have been effective because of my length of service in Sulu.³ I know all the local government officials and, by reputation, the MNLF and ASG leadership.
- The other thing that must be done is to attack the root cause of the insurgency. The people are the center of gravity. You have to win them over. You must address the root causes of the insurgency. The number one thing the people want is a better way of life and that all starts with improving the education system here.

Your biography stated that you started a system of agri-fishing cooperatives on Basilan. Can you elaborate?

- Agri-fishing was a way to empower the people of Basilan to be self-reliant, productive, and participate in the attainment of lasting peace and sustainable development. On Basilan we developed a five-year strategic plan they use as the so-called bible for local government. We gathered all the local government officials for three days to come up with a plan for their communities.

- We developed a road network so people could travel around the island. This opened up commerce. On Basilan it was easier for a fisherman to take his fish by boat to market. However, on Jolo it is cheaper for fishermen to move their goods to market overland, so building a road network on Jolo served a different purpose.
- On Basilan we wanted to develop an overarching and overlapping plan so funds would not be wasted. Basically, we wanted people to have a livelihood, and we did this through roads, storage, schools, airports, etc. The insurgents wanted to capitalize on poverty and blame the government and say the government didn't care. We wanted to show the people the government did care. We wanted to solve their hardships so they would support the government's ideology.

What are the biggest challenges you face today?

- Education. When Ces Drilon was kidnapped, a 20-million-peso ransom was paid.⁴ The abductors were so uneducated that Parad (an ASG leader) only paid them 50 thousand pesos and kept the rest for himself. They all thought that was fair because they didn't know the difference between 20 million and 50 thousand pesos. When we caught some of the captors, they had no remorse because they were illiterate and didn't know there was a punishment for kidnapping, which was life imprisonment. They also said they joined the ASG because they didn't have anything else to do, not because they believed in any cause or ideology. They said that if they had an opportunity to go to school or to better themselves they would have done it, but their life in the *barangay* (hamlet) did not allow it. In the last two to three years on Jolo Island, student enrollment has increased 30 to 40 percent. There are 47 new schools with 120 new classrooms. This has made a huge difference in the lives of the people.
- One of the reasons Sulu is this way is because everything that is supposed to be for the people was taken away by the politicians. The politicians want to keep the people illiterate so they can continue to benefit off their poverty. The government gives the politicians money to improve their towns. The politicians can do what they want with that money, so they keep it and lie to their people. I had a meeting with all of the *barangay* captains on the south side of Jolo. One of the *barangay* captains said, "Look what I've done for my people . . . I built 15 kilometers of roads." I told him it was a lie and that the Americans built that road during *Balikatan*.⁵ There is a huge amount of corruption and it leads to neglect of the people. How do these people know if they are being taken advantage of? The long-term solution is through education. This is the biggest challenge for the future. We must have government leadership that isn't corrupt, that doesn't take advantage of the people. We have to transform the politicians, get rid of the corrupt ones. We must get rid of politicians' absenteeism.⁶
- In addition, there is a deep-seeded hatred of the military because of historical treatment. In the past there was indiscriminant bombing that killed a lot of civilians. If the military got attacked on Jolo, then the military would burn down a village. This just created more problems. There must be respect between the military and the people. When I was here as a brigade commander I didn't dare go outside of the gate because we would be attacked. Now I can drive all over the island. The military has made huge improvements and it all has to do with how we are treating the people.

- The military has been studying contemporary counterinsurgency manuals, such as your new counterinsurgency manual. We have adopted something called the triad strategy. Each part of the triangle enhances and supports the other, and over everything we consider the information operations implications.

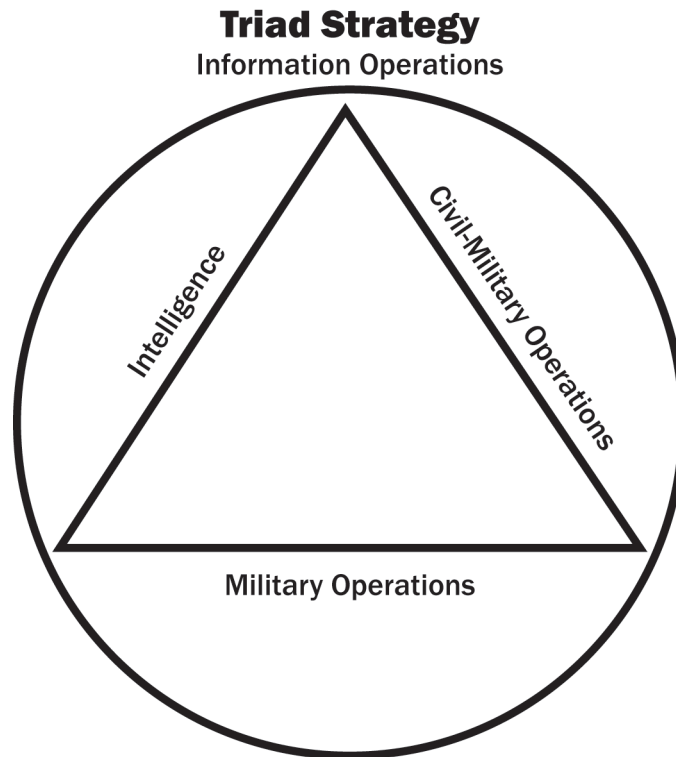


Figure 1. The triad strategy

- There is another way of looking at the problem. In order to effectively battle the things that the insurgency is doing, we must engage at every level, not just at the military level. The insurgency engages the youth, the women, the working class, the military, and the elderly, and we must do the same thing. Too often, we are just trying to use the military to solve all of the problems. There must be an interagency cooperation between the local officials, the teachers, the police, the local community, etc.
- One hundred fifty kilometers of roads have been built in the last two years of *Balikatan* exercises. This has made a huge difference. In the Patikul area, there used to be a lot of MNLF and ASG. There aren't as many now because we built a road right through that area. Now on both sides of the road instead of insurgent camps there are farm fields. The roads have eliminated the safe haven. The civilians in the area now support the military instead of the insurgents.
- We must always be cognizant of our environment. I always tell my senior leaders to carry some candy with them when they travel so when they stop they can pass it out to the kids. Maybe after a couple of times passing out candy to the kids, they will get to know you and see that you aren't bad. Then maybe the next time you can ask them, "Have you seen anyone with guns in your town?" Perhaps they will say, "Yes, after you left last time, men with guns came to our town." Then you will know the insurgents

move in when the military leaves. When the mothers see you are friendly to their children, maybe they won't be so afraid of you and will be friendlier towards you. This is how you build trust and rapport in a village. I tell my soldiers and marines that when you move into a village, do not build walls and barriers between you and the people. This shows the people that you don't trust them if you build walls around yourself. You must use the people as your wall against the insurgents. Trust them and they will protect you. It has worked here.

- What we need to do now are more small-scale military operations against the ASG and MNLF. We must do more surgical strikes that cause less damage to the area and to the people, and attack their leadership. That is really all that is left here.
- What happened on Basilan and Jolo was not accidental. It was by the presence of the U.S., and the people are very receptive to what we are doing together. The people understand there is a long history of the U.S. helping them. When the MNLF took over the ARMM [Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao], everything went downhill.⁷ The people are not happy, and this stunted the growth of Sulu. The people realize now that an insurgent group is not fit to govern people. They didn't have a plan, and the people suffered.

Do you have any advice for U.S. service personnel?

- Remember that we are people oriented. It is an honor for us to serve with each other. When Americans come over here, they should be more relaxed, be more informal. Get to know the people better; work on building rapport. It is a different environment from Iraq and Afghanistan. People here are more accepting and more appreciative. They like to interact more. The key to success here in the Philippines is the people, so it is very important that you understand the people.

Endnotes

1. Basilan and Jolo are neighboring islands in the Sulu Archipelago.
2. Sulu refers to the chain of islands in the southwest Philippines, which includes Basilan and Jolo.
3. Major General Sabban has served in various leadership positions in the Sulu Archipelago since 1982.
4. Ces Drilon was an ABS-CBN [Alto Broadcasting System-Chronical Broadcasting Network] Philippine news reporter who was kidnapped by ASG on Jolo on 8 June 2008, held for nine days, and released for a supposed ransom of 20 million pesos.
5. The *Balikatan* series is an annual event aimed at improving combined planning, combat readiness, and interoperability while enhancing security relations and demonstrating U.S. resolve to support the Republic of the Philippines against internal and external aggression.
6. There is a problem with politicians who do not reside in the areas where they are elected. Often politicians will move out of the town they represent to improve their own lifestyle at the expense of their constituents.

7. The ARMM is the region of the Philippines that is composed of all the Philippines' predominantly Muslim provinces; namely, Basilan (except Isabela City), Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi; and the Philippines' only predominantly Muslim city, the Islamic City of Marawi. It is the only region that has its own government. The regional capital is at Cotabato City, although this city is outside of its jurisdiction.

The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines

Dr. Zachary Abuza

Reprinted with permission from the *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

Since launching a major offensive against the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in August 2006, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have dealt the group a number of crippling blows. While members of the ASG are still at large, the frequency and lethality of their attacks have dropped precipitously since the first quarter of 2007, when several top commanders were killed. The ASG lack any semblance of central leadership at this point. Indeed, their continued existence seems to be more due to the AFP's failings than to any concerted effort to regroup. Moreover, the ASG appears short on financial resources and has reverted back to spates of kidnappings for ransom, effectively jettisoning what little ideological pretensions the group ever had.

Background

Formed in 1991 by a veteran of the Afghan jihad, Abdurrajak Janjalani, the ASG developed as a small-scale terrorist organization committed to establishing an Islamic state in the Sulu archipelago. Yet, unlike the larger Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the ASG was decidedly sectarian in its killings. The group attacked churches and kidnapped or killed Christian priests or missionaries. By 1996-1998, the group had been seriously degraded with the loss of their al-Qa`ida funding and the death of their leader, Abdurrajak. From 1996-2002, the Abu Sayyaf were no more than a group of well-armed kidnapers, driven by profit rather than ideological fervor. Although they gained international notoriety in 2000-2001 with several high-profile raids and large-scale kidnappings on Philippine and Malaysian dive resorts, they remained a criminal threat. The 2001 hostage taking of an American missionary couple and the beheading of another American citizen were the *casus belli* for the U.S. intervention in the southern Philippines. Since then, U.S. Special Forces have rotated in and out of the southern Philippines where they provide training and intelligence for their AFP counterparts.

The capture and killing of several ASG leaders in 2002 actually had a backlash: Janjalani's younger brother, Khadaffy, consolidated a degree of power and re-oriented the group back toward its ideological principles. At the same time, the members of the Indonesian-dominated terrorist organization, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), based in MILF camps, established ties with the ASG. By 2003, all kidnappings had ceased, and starting in 2004 the ASG and JI had begun a new wave of terrorist bombings from Mindanao to Manila, prompting several offensives by government forces. An AFP bombing of a MILF safe house in the Liguasan Marsh where several ASG and JI members were holed up prompted the MILF to oust them. By January 2005, top JI members Dulmatin and Umar Patek were based with the ASG in Jolo.

Operation Ultimatum began in August 2006 and continues to this day, although the real operational tempo diminished by mid-2007. U.S. military advisors and analysts were surprised that the AFP was able to maintain the offensive on Jolo Island for as long as they did. In all, eight battalions of AFP and Philippine Marines were deployed. Five years of U.S. training and assistance began to bear fruit and for the first time joint inter-service operations were showing real gains. In September 2006 and March 2007, two top leaders, Khadaffy Janjalani and Abu Solaiman, were killed. Since then, the ASG has fallen into a tail spin.

Current state of the ASG

While a handful of press reports and analysts asserted that the ASG had appointed the Middle East-trained Yasser Igasan as their new leader, there was no evidence to support this claim. Igasan had been in Saudi Arabia since 2001 studying religion and fundraising for Moro causes. An April 2008 press report from the Philippines later denied that Igasan had become the group's new chieftain, and Philippine security officials acknowledged that the ASG "haven't been able to come up with a single, influential leader who can unite the different factions." Some of the remaining ASG leaders still at large include:

- Isnilon Totoni Hapilon, alias Salahuddin or Abu Mus`ab
- Radullan Sahiron, alias Kumander Putol
- Umbra Abu Jumdail, alias Dr. Abu Pula
- Albader Parad
- Osman, alias Usman or Rizal
- Gumbahali Jumdail
- Ustadz Hatta Haipe
- Tahil Sali
- Abu Sofian
- Suhod Tanadjalan, alias Kumander Suhod

The AFP asserted that Isnilon Hapilon was wounded in late April in a battle that killed his son. Hapilon, who has a bounty from the U.S. government of up to \$5 million, remains one of the leading figures of the movement. Although Radullan Sahiron remains at large, at 71-years-old and missing a limb the AFP no longer see him as an active leader. Umbra Abu Jumdail (Abu Pula) remains the second-most wanted figure, although Albadar Parad is often described as the group's most violent and dangerous commander. What is clear is that there are distinct factions, and the ASG in no sense is a cohesive organization.

Fleeing the authorities and short of funds, the ASG is a diminished terrorist threat. In September 2007, an ASG operative was arrested en route to Manila where he was ordered to stage diversionary attacks. The most spectacular attack in the past year was the November 13, 2007 bombing-cum-assassination of Basilan Congressman Wahab Akbar, a former member of the ASG who had become an outspoken opponent against them. 8 In February 2008, two suspected ASG operatives were arrested in Davao Oriental with an Indonesian JI member, Baihaqi. On March 1, a homemade bomb ripped through a bar near an army base on Jolo, wounding six people. In mid-April, two bombs fashioned from 60-millimeter and 81-millimeter mortar shells were detonated outside of a Catholic cathedral and cafe in Zamboanga, although no one was injured. That same month, police arrested an ASG operative in Quezon City, Alpaker Said (Abu Jandal), and charged him with the attack on Wahab Akbar. Police believed he was planning a new series of attacks.

There were many other small bombings in central Mindanao in late 2007 and early 2008, but most have been attributed to hard line elements of the MILF or the al-Khobar extortion gang, not the ASG. Nonetheless, the ASG is still able to perpetrate lethal attacks, such as the May 29 bombing of an Air Force facility in Zamboanga that killed three and wounded 18. What is all the more remarkable is that due to being constantly on the run, the ASG has been unable to leverage the technical bomb-making expertise of two JI operatives implicated in the 2002 Bali bombing—Dulmatin and Umar Patek—who have been with the ASG since early 2005.

The AFP has engaged the ASG in a small number of fierce encounters. Two police were killed in Jolo in January 2008. At the end of that month, a pitched battle in Tawi-Tawi led to the death of Wahab Opao, as well as reports that JI operative Dulmatin was killed. Although a body was later exhumed and DNA tested, U.S. officials have failed to conclude whether the body was in fact Dulmatin's. Between February and April, nearly 10 soldiers and marines were killed in clashes on Jolo. What is more troubling is that clashes with the ASG on Basilan, which had been clear of the ASG for several years, are now drawing the AFP into battles with the MILF, who maintain a camp in Tipo-Tipo. In July 2007, 14 AFP were killed, 10 of whom were beheaded, when the ASG sought refuge in the MILF camp. While the MILF admitted to killing the AFP in self-defense, they denied that they were fighting alongside the ASG, giving them sanctuary or that they had beheaded the troops. On May 25, fighting again broke out between government forces and MILF and ASG combatants in Basilan, leaving six AFP dead. Again, the MILF denied any ASG presence.

Re-Degeneration: Return to kidnappings

Perhaps the most telling sign of the ASG's current state is their degeneration to kidnappings. While there were a number of incidences in 2007, the tempo has increased in the first half of 2008 and money has become the primary motive. In mid-January, a Roman Catholic priest was killed in a botched kidnapping, while a teacher from the parochial school was taken hostage. The teacher was released in late March after his family paid a 200,000 peso (\$4,880) ransom. In March, a South Korean and Filipino were abducted. In early April, ASG members kidnapped a Department of Education official and several teachers. On April 10, ASG gunmen released seven persons they abducted separately. On May 28, a Filipino businessman in Zamboanga was abducted. In all of these cases, the captives were released after ransoms were paid, suggesting that the ASG is short of funds.

What concerns Philippine officials most about the trend is that the ASG seem to be planning a new wave of high profile kidnappings of tourists. On March 13, a suspected Indonesian member of JI and ASG member were arrested on the resort island of Boracay, where authorities assert they were "casing" hotels and bars. Most recently, on June 8, Ces Drilon, a popular senior reporter for ABS-CBN, was kidnapped by suspected ASG militants; a ransom is being demanded for her release.

How does the ASG survive?

Into the eighth year of U.S. training and hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid, not to mention the bulk of USAID (United States Agency for International Development) funding being concentrated in Sulu and Mindanao, why have the ASG not been finished off? The current order of battle only puts them at 300-400 people. Although the terrain is very rugged, the AFP has considerable intelligence being provided from the United States. People in Jolo, at first resistant to the American presence, have been more receptive due to the civic action and medical missions being conducted. More intelligence is coming from tips from the local community who are

increasingly tired of the ASG's nihilism. Moreover, the United States has provided more than \$10 million since 2001 for information leading to arrests of ASG members.

Part of the problem is that the operational tempo of the AFP is down considerably from 2007, when 127 ASG were killed and 38 captured. The AFP has a tendency to not hold on to territory it has captured. In mid-April 2008, the Philippine Army disregarded the ASG as a threat and withdrew a large number of their forces from Jolo, leaving the bulk of operations with the marines.

A more cynical answer is that the AFP has little intention of finishing the job since that would end the pipeline of U.S. training and military assistance, which would force the funds allocated by the government in Manila to actually make it down to front-line troops. The campaign against institutionalized corruption in the AFP has not been as impressive. As the recent State Department report on terrorism noted, "Limited financial resources, inadequate salaries, corruption, low morale, limited cooperation between police and prosecutors, and other problems in law enforcement have hampered bringing terrorists to justice."

Yet, the ASG is also the beneficiary of a government that has never tried to establish a holistic solution for its Moro troubles, instead killing operatives as they appear and implementing a divide and conquer policy toward the three disparate rebel groups. In March 2007, MNLF commanders in Jolo and Zamboanga quit the peace process and attacked government forces. Habier Malik joined up with the ASG in Jolo, in effect doubling their size, because the government had failed to implement the 1996 Tripoli Accords or attend the Tripartite Talks with the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The government at first refused to attend the talks, citing the ongoing peace process with the MILF, and since then has attended but been non-committal. The parallel set of peace talks with the MILF has stalled since the November 2007 breakthrough on the issue of ancestral domain. In the end, the AFP and hardliners in the government have refused to endorse what government negotiators agreed on. Malaysia has since begun withdrawing their peacekeepers from Mindanao, and cease-fire violations are increasing. Frustration on the part of all the various Moro ethnic groups is palpable, and few have any faith that the government ever negotiates in sincerity.

While all three groups have failed to develop a common program or platform, at the tactical level of autonomous field commanders, there is considerable cooperation. Although this has helped keep the ASG alive, they are clearly a diminished threat.

Note: This article was originally published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point in the June 2008 edition, Volume 1, Issue 7, of the *CTC Sentinel*. The original article can be found at <<http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/CTCSentinel-Vol1Iss7.pdf>>.

Gaining People's Support and Involvement in Counter-Insurgency

COL Darwin Z. Guerra, Philippine Army

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One of the difficult tasks of the military is to gain people's support and active involvement in solving insurgency. It is difficult because the root causes of insurgency affecting the people cannot be addressed by the military alone, but by the entire government machinery. Despite its complexity, however, there is hope that the majority of the people may be encouraged to actively involve themselves in the fight against insurgency.

But let us first examine the kind of insurgency that our country is facing. The truth is that some if not all Filipinos are apathetic about it. Some Filipinos are victims of it. But some Filipinos consider it as their best hope. Philippine insurgency, however, is more than banditry. Some authors say that Philippine insurgency has complicated root causes. That the long history of Philippine insurgency is directly connected to neglect. That the lack of economic opportunity, the lack of education, the disenfranchisement of people and the total mistrust and frustration of people are just some of the factors that led to insurgency.

The opinions may be right or may be wrong but there is a need for the majority of the people to fight insurgency and its root causes. Of course, it is still government that should run ahead of the race.

Basically, there are two types of insurgents in the Philippines. The first type is the communist insurgents while the second type is the Bangsamoro insurgents. Ideologically, the two types of insurgents are totally incompatible. Communist insurgents seek to overthrow the government in order to establish their so-called proletariat regime. Communist insurgents are widespread but very few in numbers. On the other hand, Moro insurgents seek to separate a significant portion of Philippine territory, specifically Mindanao, from the rest of the archipelago. The Moro insurgents are highly localized in the southern regions of the Philippines. Moro insurgents desire to establish a theocratic Muslim state. On the other hand, the communist insurgents want to establish an atheistic, classless society. The two ideologies are mutually contradictory.

The communist and Moro separatist insurgencies are just symptoms of a greater social problem of the Philippines. Philippine insurgency is just an offshoot of a root problem. All-out-war against the insurgents is not the solution to the problem. All-out-war will only worsen the animosity. Injustice is committed by a great number of ordinary citizens. By just being apathetic of the situation is a grave injustice. Some of us simply do not care. The Filipinos shall become actively involved in insurgency if we care to fight the root causes of insurgency.

In recent years, the fight against counter-insurgency by legitimate military forces in the Philippines and abroad, particularly in such hotspots as Afghanistan and Iraq, has increasingly driven home the lesson that modern communal wars cannot be won through the use of armed force alone. A major companion nowadays of most counter-insurgency campaigns is community development, which in effect means gaining the people's support and involvement.

Although the US forces in Iraq is seen by some local residents more as an invader than a savior, the internal struggle there among religious sects and with the Americans lend an insurgency character to the very bloody conflict. Iraqi extremists oppose not only the Americans, but also the established government. As the situation unraveled, the American government has become

convinced that by getting the majority of Iraqis on the side of the government – not to say the occupying US Soldiers – is indispensable to the ultimate success of its democracy-directed efforts there. Hence, to gain the people’s support, basic needs and utilities are delivered and infrastructures are built or repaired. Native security units are organized. All are meant to entice public support for US as well as Iraqi institutions.

Parallel developments are happening in Mindanao

In the Philippines, US soldiers serving under the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) mostly in Mindanao have been regularly conducting civic-actin projects like MEDCAP as well as constructing infrastructures like water systems, roads, school buildings and others. In Mindanao, the Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) USAID, in collaboration of the Office of President Economic Development Council, is helping hand in hand with our civil and military units in Mindanao with Mr. Noel Ruiz and Mr. Ronaldo Ypil as agency coordinators. The objective is the same: to gain popular support in its frontline pre-emptive operations against terrorist threats coming from neighboring provinces. Without the populace’s support, this goal will become immensely difficult to achieve.

However, the results since the recent years, as a recent Pentagon report said, have been mainly encouraging, in that the campaign against terrorism in the Philippines has been judged as quite successful. Terrorism in the region has been largely contained or cut down.

On the part of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, its counter-insurgency campaigns have had similar success, though not as absolute. The two major insurgencies in the country, made up of the Bangsamoro secessionist war in Mindanao and the Communist-Maoist rebellion in rural areas, have continued to pose serious threats to the State and the security of the people. At present, the virtual breakdown of the ceasefire between the AFP and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is evidenced by the intense fight in Central Mindanao, causing deaths, evacuation, and socio-economic displacements. In areas where sympathetic Muslims are the predominant inhabitants, the rebels are able to move freely and the AFP finds it difficult to maintain round the clock security. This is the situation in such areas as Basilan’s and Sulu’s hinterlands, and some municipalities in Central Mindanao.

Such unsecured areas, in turn, serve as staging bases and sanctuaries of rebels, terrorists, and bandits. Victims kidnapped in urban locations, for example, are spirited away to these lairs and held there at the pleasure and whim of the kidnapers. Residents of these communities, even when aware of the presence of hostages and it is a criminal activity, are pathetic if not cooperative towards the kidnapers. Rebels and terrorists enjoy the same support or regard from such populations.

This depiction of negative situations characterized by insurgencies, criminalities or terrorisms is but intended to show why people’s support to government and legitimate forces such as the military is crucial to counter-insurgency operations. On the other hand, where the community is supportive, no problem exists, and virtually no insurgency problem will worry either the government or the AFP. Therefore, where the AFP goes – and it goes where the war and conflict is – other community development agencies should closely follow, since serving the needs of the people is the surest way to get their support and involvement.

Special Forces units and Citizens Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGUs)

Yet, community development work is not the only strategy in counter-insurgency. On the part of the AFP, particularly its Special Forces units, it has past decades recruited and organized native security assets in the form of auxiliaries or paramilitary men. In so doing, grassroots or mass-base support is encouraged and developed. This strategy does not only project more widely the armed capabilities of the AFP, but also develops a sense of self-defense and self-reliance among the people. Through their local militias, people develop an indispensable affinity with their government. In the Mindanao conflict, this paramilitary strategy has been instrumental in reducing and neutralizing secessionist rebels.

The current proposal to activate six more Special Forces battalions promises to strengthen the counter-insurgency capability of the AFP and the Government. This is because SF soldiers are specially trained to develop, organize, train, equip, and control native security forces, or CAFGUs paramilitaries. Once mobilized, these additional battalions will enable the AFP to fast-track the formation of more paramilitary units in far-flung communities, as well as to supervise and control them to accomplish specific counter-insurgency objectives.

The impact of additional SF battalions will increase even more immensely if new recruit candidate soldiers will come from rural and far-flung areas. New soldiers coming from such areas will rob insurgents of the opportunity to recruit them. Local constituents will also be grateful for the economic benefits resulting from soldiers coming from their rural hometowns.

Culture of Peace

Furthermore, in recent years certain highly motivated Army commanders have taken the initiative of providing special “culture of peace” and conflict management trainings to their rank and file. The acquired know-how enables soldiers to gain sophistication to peacefully resolve low-level, local conflicts such as the common family feuds common to Muslim-dominated areas. Containing and resolving such conflicts reduces wider and more devastating fights, and further results in gaining the support of the local and affected people. This has been proven time and again.

The rise of non-government organizations focused on peace-building, particularly on Mindanao, has made it much easier for some AFP units to link with them and utilize their programs, resources, and networks to increase popular goodwill towards the AFP.

Through such linkages and strategies, the AFP will realize even more of its mandate to be not only the people’s protector, but also their very best of friends.

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Enhanced CMO to Better Serve The People Across the Land

CMO OG7 Research Team, Philippine Army

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The thrusts of Civil-Military Operations centered on the propagation and development of CMO doctrine. It also emphasized the importance of enhancing CMO training to support capability development and skills competency and the development of CMO projects that will bring together our various stakeholders and government agencies for a more comprehensive effort.

Psychological Operations (PsyOps)

For the period, 39,904 various Psychological Operations activities were conducted by Army units. Significant were the 62 activities which resulted to the surrender of 44 enemy personalities and 21 firearms. In addition, development and production of PsyOps materials were sustained to expose and drumbeat the CPP/NPA as well as the SPSG atrocities and grave abuses.

As against CPP/NPA, PsyOps audio-visual materials containing proceedings on NPA Kangaroo Court were disseminated to all Infantry Divisions down to battalion level. On the other hand, about 5,000 copies of print PsyOps materials were produced and distributed to 1st and 6th Infantry Divisions to support their effort in pursuing and apprehending wanted MILF commanders.

One significant accomplishment for the period was the winning on the cases of Writ of Habeas Corpus and Writ of Amparo filed against the Army by the CPP/NPA legal fronts. On the other hand, the Army Literacy Patrol System (ALPS) remains to be an effective PsyOps tool that is being conducted by Army units especially in areas that are hardly reached by formal education system.

Moreover, with the recent turmoil in Mindanao, a PsyOps Team (POT) was deployed and placed OPCON to 1st Infantry (TABAK) Division, Philippine Army. The deployment of the POT is in support to the CMO capabilities of IID particularly in the conduct of Psychological Operations against the rogue MILF.

Civil Affairs

The Army, in collaboration with the different LGUs, LGAs, NGO and POs conducted a total of 75,126 various Civil Affairs activities with nearly nine million beneficiaries. Despite the meager resources, CMO projects that provide the optimum impact on the target audience were prioritized.

Notably, the Army played a vital role in the successful implementation of the Kalayaan Barangay Program (KBP), also known as the “Kalahi Para sa Kalayaan” (K4K). The Army’s relentless linkage and collaboration with government agencies (GAs) brought convergence of efforts among stakeholders in addressing armed conflicts in a way that respects and empowers the people in target communities, thereby achieving better impact and success of the program.

The implementation of the KBP benefited 140 barangays from the completed and ongoing projects undertaken by the Army Engineer units. The completed KBP projects include 37 school buildings, 34 water systems and 13 farm-to-market roads. On the other hand, the ongoing

projects include the construction of two school buildings, seven water systems, 16 farm-to-market roads and one evacuation center.

On health services, joint medical/dental civic action benefited 419,633 people and about 1,015,350 cc of blood was extracted during bloodletting activities. The Army and field units were also actively involved in KALAHÍ undertakings and continuously worked on CARES program (Community Assistance through Rural Empowerment and Social Services) which benefited a total of more or less 11,555 and 25,580 individuals respectively.

Public Affairs

On Public Affairs, a significant number of community relations activities were recorded with a total of 95,966 and benefited more or less 24,163,179 people. In line with the Command's guidance to enhance linkage with the community, the Army and its field units participated in 451 community-based socio-economic projects whereby 13,396 people benefited; 147,740 were accorded with civil work assistance; 622,819 individuals as well as communities benefited in the Army-spearheaded cleanliness and beautification activities nationwide; a total of 2,461,234 of individuals and communities have joined and participated in national historical events on different occasions; 869,778 individuals participated in the Army's sponsored/initiated sports events; more or less 402,310 people witnessed military parades conducted nationwide while more than one and a half million benefited from the local customs and traditions related projects.

Likewise, in pursuit of information operations, active engagement with the media was undertaken with a total of 9,083. The Command and Army field units intensified its information campaign by utilizing the tri-media to increase awareness of the public on different programs and activities of the government, the AFP and PA in particular, while reinforcing favorable issues and gaining public support for Internal Security Operations initiatives.

Another innovation on the aspect of Public Information is the Print Media Analysis (PMA). It provided the Army the scientific approach on how to determine and evaluate the effectiveness of the government in media campaign as well as the AFP and the Philippine Army as against the enemy.

Capability Build-Up

In terms of capability build-up, CMO units/offices and tactical units were equipped with mission essential equipment with corresponding training to further improve their CMO skills and other competencies.

One of the innovations in addressing the propaganda effort of the CPP/NPA both in the rural areas and in urban areas is the procurement and subsequent employment of 32 units of Army Mobile Community Radio Station (AMCRAS), now renamed as Radio Broadcast System (RBS) worth P 12.58 Million.

To optimize the effective and efficient employment of the RBS, the Radio Broadcast Training has been conceptualized to train PA personnel to become radio broadcasters.

To build-up the CMO information pipeline, 39 laptop computers, 32 units of Globe Visibility Broadband internet connectivity, three desktop computers, three multimedia projectors and two printers were issued to field units and offices amounting to P 2.018 Million.

During the CMO Family Conference held in October 2008, and initial orientation training was conducted to demonstrate the proper utilization of the issued CMO IT equipment. For the period, 13 video cameras and 12 digital cameras amounting to P 0.936 Million were issued to field units and offices (CMOUs, 2CMO Bn, 7CMO Bn and OACPA) to enhance their capability in audio-visual production (AVP). The Audio-Visual Development and Production Training was conducted to enable CMO operators to develop and produce audio-visual products. It further aims to equip the CMO operators the necessary skills and capability in utilizing the equipment to be able to optimize its use in CMO activities.

Training and Seminars/Workshops

The Command continuously conducts relevant trainings and seminars/workshops to produce quality CMO planners/operators as well as to improve concepts in order to maximize the effects on the intended target audience.

In line with the Continuing Education Program (CEP) of the government to answer the need of elevating the education level of the people particularly the deprived and underserved communities, OG7 collaborated with the Bureau of Alternative Learning System (BALS) of the Department of Education (DepEd) and AFPNDSC for the conduct of four Army Literacy Patrol System (ALPS) Trainer's Training to Mindanao Units (1ID, 4ID, 6ID and 10ID).

The Command also successfully conducted the CMO Family Conference/Workshop in October 2008 which was designed to improve the CMO capabilities of Army units in accordance with the ISO framework that is geared towards the defeat of the enemy.

As an offshoot to said CMO Family Conference, the CMO Staff Training was conceptualized and launched. This concept was implemented as a stop gap measure to improve CMO units as well as CMO Staff Officers capability on the application of CMO operational and management tools and familiarize them on the preparation and conduct of CMO plan.

Moreover, aside from regular CMO Courses being conducted at CMOS, OG7 in coordination with OG8 facilitated and supported the training of six SOT-WA Operators Training, three SOT-WA Trainers Training and one SALA'AM Trainers Training. Participants of these trainings immersed in the field in support of the on-going White Area Operations in Metro Manila as well as in some areas of 4ID and 10ID as part of their training exercise.

Doctrine Development

Since the reactivation of the Office of the Civil-Military Operations (CMO) G7, PA, it has undertaken vigorous measures in doctrine development to effectively and efficiently carry out its functions in support to the accomplishment of the Philippine Army's mission. In this context, the PA CMO Manual was developed and promulgated on 15 May 2008. The doctrine was written to provide a clear and concise understanding of the Army's CMO and its general applications.

Likewise, the Public Affairs Manual was also promulgated on 25 April 2008. The said manual sets forth the standard guidelines in the conduct of Public Affairs activities as one of the program component of CMO.

In the continuing development of CMO doctrine, the Psychological Operations (PsyOps) Manual has been reviewed and the necessary revisions are being made in order for PsyOps to be more relevant and responsive to specific situations in the field. The proponent advice for the review

and revision of the manual was submitted on 22 October 2008. Also, the writing of the Civil Affairs Manual was started to outline principles relative to the conduct of Civil Affairs planning and operations at the operational and tactical level in the Philippine Army. The proponent advice for the writing was submitted on May 2008.

Other Accomplishments

For the period, six PsyOps projects in the form of audio-visual presentations were conceptualized purposely to sustain psychological operations and public affairs to expose the CPP/NPA/NDF atrocities while endeavoring to put a stop on the ideological non-sense and criminal acts of the CT organization.

These are the following: AVP for CT Atrocities Project; AVP for Children in Armed Conflict (CIAC) Project; AVP for SOT-RA and SOT-WA Project which consist of AVP for the youth/student sector in white areas; AVP for youth in red areas; AVP for parents; and, AVP for Victims of Crossfire.

On the other hand, the Philippine Army recognizes the need to implement the totality of the GRP-CPLA Peace Accord as embodied in the AFP LOI 24/01 "PAGKAKADWA" in order to sustain the government's peace and security programs in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR). As a vital component of the peace agreement, the livelihood program covers the 408 former CPLA rebels who were not accommodated in the Integration and CAFGU Programs. The objective of this program is to facilitate the mainstreaming of the former rebels to the society through participation in a cooperative to empower them and make them economically productive members of their respective communities.

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Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation: OEF-Philippines and the Indirect Approach

Colonel Gregory Wilson, U.S. Army

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The terrorist attacks of 9/11 have ushered in a new era of counterinsurgency to deal with Al-Qaeda-linked insurgent and terrorist organizations. The U.S. military's initial success in Afghanistan, as impressive as it was, forced the enemy to adapt. To survive, Al-Qaeda has transformed itself into a flatter, more cellular organization that seeks to outsource much of its work.¹ Thus, insurgency has become an Al-Qaeda priority in terms of rhetoric, recruitment, and spending.² The connection between terrorism and insurgency is now well established, and in fact there is tremendous overlap between the two.³

The U.S. military, though, is struggling to adapt to protracted, insurgent-type warfare. America's affinity for high-tech conventional conflict and quick, kinetic, unilateral solutions that avoid contact with the local populace has slowed its response to this complex form of conflict.⁴ How, then, can the U.S. military tailor a more efficient, more effective approach to future military efforts against Al-Qaeda-linked groups around the globe? Specifically, how can the U.S. military implement a sustainable, low-visibility approach that is politically acceptable to our current and future partners, and that can help change the moderate Muslim community's perception of U.S. operations in the War on Terrorism (WOT)?

The history of insurgent conflict during the Philippines Insurrection (1899-1902), Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), and Hukbalahap Rebellion (1946-1954) shows that successful COIN operations are protracted efforts that rely heavily on indigenous security forces.⁵ Therefore, the U.S. WOT strategy should emphasize working indirectly "through, by, and with" indigenous forces and building their capacity to conduct effective operations against common enemies.

The Unilateral Approach

As free societies gain ground around the world, the U.S. military is going to be increasingly restricted in terms of how it operates. An age of democracy means an age of frustratingly narrow rules of engagement. That is because fledgling democratic governments, besieged by young and aggressive local media, will find it politically difficult—if not impossible—to allow American troops on their soil to engage in direct action. —Robert Kaplan⁶

The current COIN campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated that unilateral U.S. military operations can be ineffective and even counterproductive to the democratic institutions we are trying to establish. To reduce our footprint in Iraq, our top priority now is to stand up Iraqi security forces to take over the fight against insurgents. These forces must prevail if Iraq is to achieve and maintain long-term stability.

A large foreign military presence or occupation force in any country undermines the legitimacy of the host-nation government in the eyes of its citizens and the international community. As we now know, large U.S. occupation forces in Islamic regions can create problems for us. A senior British military officer who served in Iraq has remarked that the U.S. Army there has acted much like "fuel on a smoldering fire"; he suggests that this is "as much owing to their presence as their actions."⁷

If he is right and our mere presence can be counterproductive, then a tailored, low-visibility approach that plays well in the moderate Muslim community and is politically acceptable to our potential WOT partners makes sound strategic sense.

Blowback

Osama bin Laden has made the presence of U.S. forces in the Middle East a rallying point for global jihad by a new generation of Muslim holy warriors.⁸ Just as the war in Afghanistan against the Soviets created the leaders of today’s global terrorist network, so Iraq has the potential to produce far more dangerous second- and third-order effects. Blowback from the current war in Iraq might be even more dangerous than the fallout from Afghanistan.

Fighters in Iraq are more battle-hardened than the Arabs who fought demoralized Soviet Army conscripts in Afghanistan. They are testing themselves against arguably the best army in history and acquiring skills far more useful for future terrorist operations than those their counterparts learned during the 1980s. Mastering how to make improvised explosive devices or conduct suicide operations is more relevant to urban terrorism than the conventional guerrilla tactics the mujahideen used against the Red Army. U.S. military commanders say that today’s militants in Afghanistan have adopted techniques perfected in Iraq.⁹

The transfer of these deadly skills to Al-Qaeda-linked insurgencies presents a clear and present danger. The world has already seen bomb-making skills migrate with deadly results from the Indonesian-based Jemaah Islamiyya to the Abu Sayyaf Group in Manila and throughout the Southern Philippines.¹⁰ Other countries with Al-Qaeda-linked insurgencies include Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, and India.¹¹ Developing indigenous capacity to confront this emerging threat will become increasingly important to future WOT efforts.



Southern Philippines—Joint Operations Area

The Southern Philippines

The Southern Philippines (Figure 1) is typical of areas that are ripe for Al-Qaeda influence. It is located along ethnic, cultural, and religious fault-lines in a region that has been only loosely controlled or governed throughout its long history of occupation.¹² The area is home to a discontented Muslim population dominated by a predominately Catholic government based in Manila. Approximately 5 million Muslims live in 5 of the poorest provinces of the Philippines,

in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. In these provinces, the majority of the population has an income well below the poverty line.

These regions are what Sean Anderson calls “grey areas”—“ungovernable areas in developing nations over which unstable, weak national governments have nominal control but which afford criminal syndicates or terrorists and insurgent groups excellent bases of operation from which they can conduct far reaching operations against other targeted nations.”¹³

Philippine “grey areas” are notorious for civil unrest, lawlessness, terrorist activity, and Muslim separatist movements. They are home or safe haven for several Al-Qaeda-linked organizations, including the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Abu Sayyaf, and the Indonesia-based Jemaah Islamiyya. The core leaders of many of these groups received their initial training in the camps of Afghanistan and their baptism of fire in the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan.¹⁴ Al-Qaeda did not originate these movements, but it has used them as vehicles to expand its global reach and spread its extremist ideology.¹⁵

The United States became interested in the Southern Philippines shortly before 9/11, after Abu Sayyaf kidnapped several US citizens and held them hostage on their island stronghold of Basilan.¹⁶ After 9/11, the region became a front line in the WOT when Washington and Manila set their sights on the group’s destruction. Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines (OEF-P) officially began in early 2002 and is best known for Joint Task Force (JTF) 510’s combined U.S.-Philippine operations on Basilan (Balikatan 02-1). Special Forces (SF) advisory efforts began in the Southern Philippines in 2002 and continue to this day.

The Diamond Model

The unconventional or indirect approach of working “by, with, and through” indigenous forces has remained consistent throughout OEF-P.¹⁷ Led by Brigadier General Donald Wurster and Colonel David Fridovich, OEF-P planners created their guiding strategy using principles that can be found in Gordon McCormick’s strategic COIN model, called the Diamond Model.¹⁸ This model can help planners develop an effective holistic approach to cut off organizations like Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyya from their bases of popular support and to isolate, capture, or kill their members and leaders. The Philippine Government and its armed forces now call the application of principles found in the Diamond Model the “Basilan Model,” after its successful use against Abu Sayyaf on Basilan in 2002.

The Diamond Model establishes a comprehensive framework for interactions between the host-nation government, the insurgents, the local populace, and international actors or sponsors (Figure 1). The host-nation government’s goal is to destroy the insurgents or limit their growth and influence to a manageable level. Their opponent’s goal is to grow large enough to destroy the state’s control mechanisms and then either replace the existing government or force political concessions from it that achieve the group’s objectives. Jemaah Islamiyya’s and Abu Sayyaf’s objectives were to create Islamic caliphates or states in the Southern Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia.¹⁹

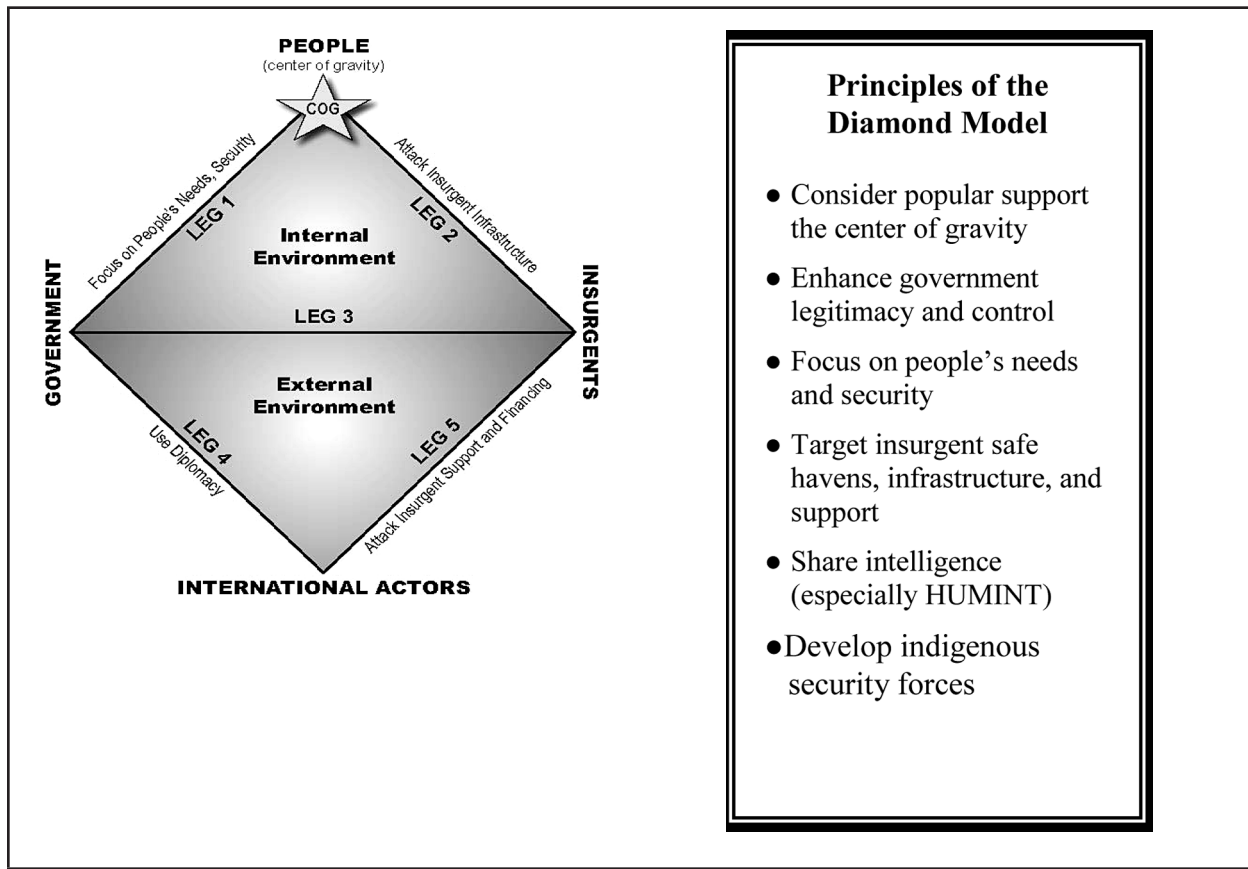


Figure 1. McCormick's Diamond Model

To develop an effective counter-strategy, the state must first understand its advantages and disadvantages relative to the insurgents. With its armed forces and police, the state has a force advantage over the insurgents. On the other hand, the insurgents have a marked information advantage. Being dispersed and embedded in the local population, they are difficult to detect and target; additionally, they have visibility of the state's security apparatus and infrastructure and can easily target them. As McCormick asserts, "The winner of this contest will be the side that can most quickly resolve its disadvantage."²⁰

The state's goal, then, should be to rectify its information disadvantage so it can effectively locate the insurgents and capture or kill them. The insurgent group's goal is to grow in strength and effectiveness so it can threaten the state's security apparatus and infrastructure before the state can overcome its information disadvantage. Time is typically on the side of the insurgents because they can often achieve their goals simply by surviving and exhausting government efforts and the national political will.

The Diamond Model can help establish the optimal strategy the state should pursue to rectify its information disadvantage and win the COIN fight. Legs 1 through 5 of the model depict the actions the counterinsurgent should take. In the case of legs 1 through 3, these actions should be sequential.²¹ The upper half of the model addresses the state's internal environment. Because it suffers from an information disadvantage, the state must first pursue leg 1 to strengthen its influence and control over the local populace. McCormick defines control as "the ability to see everything in one's area of operation that might pose a threat to security and the ability

to influence what is seen.”²² This level of visibility requires an extensive human intelligence network; it cannot be achieved by technological means. What military strategist John Paul Vann pointed out about U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam is true today: “We need intelligence from the local civilians and Soldiers from the area who understand the language, customs, and the dynamics of the local situation, who can easily point out strangers in the area even though they speak the same language.”²³

Gaining popular support is a zero-sum game. One side’s loss is the other’s gain, and vice versa. Strengthening ties with the local populace by focusing on their needs and security also denies or degrades insurgent influence over the people and leads to information that exposes the insurgent infrastructure. This allows the state to attack leg 2 with operations that disrupt the insurgent’s control mechanisms over the people. These moves often lead to actionable intelligence, which the state can use to target the insurgency’s infrastructure. Actionable intelligence gained by patiently pursuing efforts along legs 1 and 2 enables the state to identify and strike the insurgents along leg 3.

Military forces conducting COIN operations typically ignore legs 1 and 2 of the model and attempt to directly target their opponents. As the Vietnam war showed, this usually entails large-scale search-and-destroy operations that the insurgents easily avoid and that often produce collateral damage that alienates the people.²⁴ The state can defeat most insurgencies by operating effectively along legs 1 through 3, in that order.²⁵ The overall strategy (internal to the state) identifies the local populace as the center of gravity in the COIN fight and winning popular support as the key to the state’s ability to remedy its information disadvantage and win the conflict. The indirect approach of working through the local populace and indigenous security forces to target the insurgents thus becomes the most direct path to victory.

The lower half of the Diamond Model depicts the external environment. If an external sponsor is involved, the state attacks leg 5 by directly targeting the supplies and financing flowing from the outside to the insurgents. At the same time, the state implements diplomatic operations along leg 4 to gain support and resources for its COIN efforts from partner nations and other international actors. It simultaneously employs diplomatic pressure and punitive measures to influence the behavior of insurgent sponsors.

OEF-P Lines of Operation

One of the more critical elements of COIN planning is synchronizing the overall effort with the country team or embassy staff. The Diamond Model prompts planners to consider all elements of national power when planning WOT COIN operations.²⁶ In countries with well-established governments, WOT military operations play a supporting role to efforts managed by the U.S. State Department. Planning that integrates the military and country-team staff members produces optimal results. Because of the protracted nature of these operations, military and country-team staff must maintain close relationships and conduct interagency coordination on a regular basis. In the Philippines, OEF-P planners coordinate closely with the country team to facilitate interagency planning and synchronization.²⁷

Applying the principles found in the Diamond Model within the political constraints of the Philippines led to the pursuit of three interconnected lines of operation:²⁸

- *Building Philippine Armed Forces (AFP) capacity.* U.S. ground, maritime, and air components trained, advised, and assisted Philippine security forces to help create a secure and stable environment.
- *Focused civil-military operations.* Philippine-led, U.S.-facilitated humanitarian and civic-action projects demonstrated the government's concern for regional citizens and improved their quality of life.
- *Information operations (IO).* Aiming to enhance government legitimacy in the region, the joint US-Philippine effort used IO to emphasize the success of the first two lines of operation.

The lines of operation complemented country-team efforts to help government security forces operate more effectively along legs 1 through 3 of the model, thereby enhancing the host nation's legitimacy and control of the region; this in turn reduced the insurgents' local support, denied them sanctuaries, and disrupted their operations. Diplomatic efforts executed along leg 4 were also critical.

Balikatan 02-1

Principles found in the Diamond Model were successfully applied against Abu Sayyaf during OEF-P on Basilan Island in exercise Balikatan 02-1.²⁹ Located 1,000 kilometers south of Manila at the northern tip of the Sulu Archipelago in the war-torn Southern Philippines, Basilan is 1,372 square kilometers in size and home to a population of just over 300,000 people. As the northernmost island in the Sulu Archipelago, Basilan is strategically located. It has traditionally served as the jumping-off point or fallback position for terrorists operating in Central Mindanao, and its Christian population has long been prey to Muslim kidnapping gangs.³⁰ In the 1990s, Abu Sayyaf established a base of operations there and began a reign of terror that left government forces struggling to maintain security as they pursued an elusive enemy.

To succeed in COIN, the counterinsurgent must first understand the root causes of the insurgency: what are the underlying conditions that make the environment ripe for insurgent activity? To answer this question, U.S. Pacific Command deployed an SF assessment team in October 2001 to the Southern Philippines.³¹ The team conducted detailed area assessments down to the village level and updated them throughout the operation. They gathered vital information about the enemy situation, army training requirements, local demographics, infrastructure, and socioeconomic conditions.³² Measurements ranging from infant mortality rates and per capita income to the number of squatters, government services, and local education levels enabled planners to "build a map of disenfranchisement to ascertain where active and passive support would likely blossom."³³ These assessments provided critical information concerning the root causes of civil unrest at the village level. They also laid the foundation for the operational plan, for as military analyst Kalev Sepp notes, "The security of the people must be assured as a basic need, along with food, water, shelter, health care and a means of living. The failure of COIN and the root cause of insurgencies themselves can often be traced to government disregard of these basic rights."³⁴

In February 2002, the United States dispatched JTF-510, comprised of 1,300 U.S. troops, to the Southern Philippines. Its mission was to conduct unconventional warfare operations “by, with, and through” the AFP to help the government separate the population from, and then destroy, Abu Sayyaf.³⁵ The bulk of the force consisted of an air component in Mactan, Cebu, and staff and support personnel located at the JTF headquarters in Zamboanga. The tip of the U.S. spear consisted of 160 SF personnel and, later, 300 members of a Naval Construction Task Group. All U.S. forces operated under restrictive rules of engagement.³⁶ Once on Basilan, SF advisers deployed down to the battalion level and moved in with their Philippine counterparts in remote areas near insurgent strongholds. The SF teams found the Philippine units in disarray and lacking in basic infantry skills and initiative. One SF adviser said, “The situation had degraded to the point that the AFP no longer aggressively pursued the insurgents. The combination of neglect and lack of military initiative had created circumstances that contributed not only to the continuing presence and even growth of insurgent groups, but to the genesis of new terrorist and criminal organizations.”³⁷

Using their language and cultural skills, the SF teams quickly formed a bond with their military counterparts and local villagers. Their first goal was to establish a secure environment and protect the local populace. SF advisory teams went to work immediately, honing AFP military skills through focused training activities that increased unit proficiency and instilled confidence.³⁸ According to one SF adviser, “SF detachments converted AFP base camps on Basilan into tactically defensible areas, and they trained Philippine soldiers and marines in the combat lifesaving skills needed for providing emergency medical treatment with confidence. Those lifesaving skills were a significant morale booster for the AFP.”³⁹



Navy medic Aaron Vandall provides combat life saver training to members of the Philippine Armed Forces as part of Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines in March 2003. Photo courtesy DOD.

Increased patrolling accompanied training, which allowed the AFP and local security forces to reestablish security at the village level and seize the initiative from the insurgents. SF advisers credited an aggressive increase in AFP patrolling with denying Abu Sayyaf its habitual sanctuary and curtailing the group's movement.⁴⁰ The SF teams played a key role in building AFP capacity by accompanying units (as advisers only) on combat operations.⁴¹ Reestablishing security and protecting the Basilan people were the foundation for all other activities along leg 1 of the Diamond Model.

Once security was established, both civil affairs and SF Soldiers worked with their counterparts to execute high-impact projects that produced immediate and positive benefits for the local population.⁴² Humanitarian assistance and civic-action projects were initially targeted to meet the basic needs of the local populace, then refined and tailored for particular regions and provinces based on assessment results.⁴³ As the security situation improved, the U.S. Naval Construction Task Group deployed to the island to execute larger scale projects such as well digging, general construction, and improvements to roads, bridges, and piers. In addition to enhancing military capabilities, these infrastructure projects benefited local residents. When possible, locally procured materials and workers were used in order to put money directly into the local economy. Humanitarian and civic-action projects on Basilan improved the image of the AFP and the Manila government and helped return law and order to the island.⁴⁴ A key component in leg 1 of the model, the projects earned local respect, improved force protection, and reduced Muslim village support for the insurgents. Consequently, the AFP was able to cultivate closer relations with the people in insurgent-influenced areas.⁴⁵ As Colonel Darwin Guerra, battalion commander of the 32d Infantry, AFP, reported, "Where once the people supported rebels and extremists because they felt neglected or oppressed by the government, the delivery of their basic needs like health and nutrition services, construction of infrastructure and impact projects, and strengthening security in the community that the Balikatan program brought [sic] changed their attitudes and loyalty. As residents began to experience better living conditions, they withdrew support from the militants."⁴⁶

The AFP consistently took the lead on all activities and projects throughout Balikatan 02-1, with the US military playing a supporting role. Putting the AFP in the lead enhanced AFP and government legitimacy at the grassroots level and helped end passive support for the insurgents. Targeted humanitarian assistance and civic-action projects also drove a wedge between Abu Sayyaf and the local populace. At the same time, these activities provided opportunities to interact with the locals and tap into the "bamboo telegraph," the indigenous information network.⁴⁷ As villagers became more comfortable, they openly shared information on the local situation with AFP and U.S. forces.



Five Philippine Army soldiers try on US protective vests turned over to the Philippine military as part of the RP-US Military Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA), 24 January 2003. Photo courtesy DOD.

Intelligence collection and sharing was also critical to the operation. SF advisers conducted extensive information collection activities to gain situational awareness and contribute to a safe and secure environment. They shared intelligence with the AFP and helped them fuse all sources of information to develop a clearer picture of the insurgents' organizational structure. Improved relations with local residents generated increased reporting on Abu Sayyaf activity. SF advisers also leveraged US military intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance platforms, integrating these assets into intelligence collection plans to support AFP combat operations. Actionable intelligence stimulated progress on leg 3, direct AFP combat operations against Abu Sayyaf.

By August 2002, just six months later, the synergistic effects of security, improved AFP military capability, and focused civil-military operations had isolated the insurgents from their local support networks. As the security situation on Basilan continued to improve, doctors, teachers, and other professional workers who had fled the island began to return, and the Philippine Government, the U.S. Agency for International Development's Growth with Equity in Mindanao Program, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, and various nongovernmental organizations brought in additional resources to further address the root causes of the civil unrest.⁴⁸

Results of Balikatan 02-1

My visit to Basilan Island in 2005 revealed a vastly different environment from the terrorist safe haven once dominated by Abu Sayyaf. The island's physical landscape remained largely unchanged. The rugged mountains, jungle terrain, and remote villages that rebel groups and extremists had once found so inviting and conducive to their deadly activities were all still there. What had changed were the attitude and loyalties of the Basilan people, making the environment far less favorable for insurgent activity.

The US military and the Philippine Government know that Balikatan 02-1 was a success, and the operation is now commonly referred to as the “Basilan Model.” While it didn’t destroy Abu Sayyaf altogether, the model proved effective in—

- Denying the insurgents and terrorists sanctuary in targeted geographic areas (Basilan Island).⁴⁹
- Improving the capacity of indigenous forces (AFP).⁵⁰
- Enhancing the legitimacy of the host-nation government in the region.⁵¹
- Establishing the conditions for peace and development (Basilan Island).
- Providing a favorable impression of US military efforts in the region.⁵²

The holistic approach used on Basilan enabled the AFP to gain control of the situation, to become self-sufficient, and eventually to transition to peace and development activities. Both US and AFP military forces could then focus their efforts and resources on other insurgent safe havens. This approach is characteristic of the expanding inkblot, or “white zone” strategy, used during successful British COIN efforts in Malaya.

Continuing the Fight

Despite the success of US and Philippine WOT efforts on Basilan, the fight against extremism in the southern Philippines is far from over. Although Abu Sayyaf was neutralized on Basilan and significantly reduced in size, its leaders managed to flee to Central Mindanao and the island of Sulu.⁵³ Using the peace process between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Philippine Government for cover, and with assistance from Jemaah Islamiyya, Abu Sayyaf has increased its urban bombing capabilities and extended its reach as a terrorist organization.⁵⁴ To gain better visibility on this emerging threat and to continue to assist the AFP, SF advisory efforts have adapted as well.

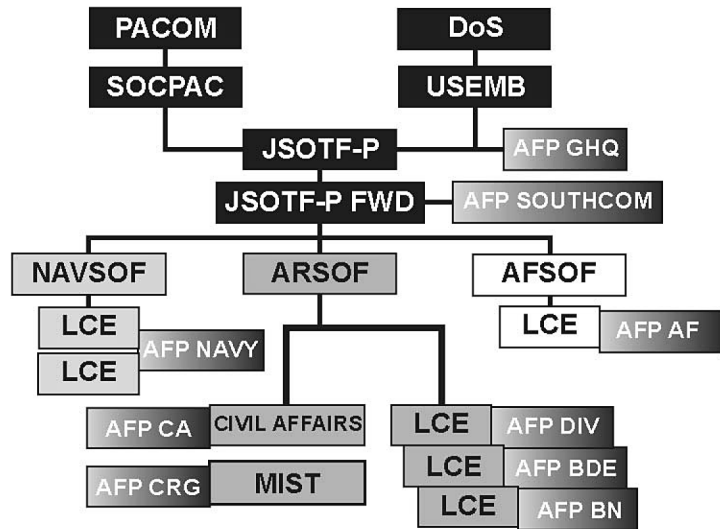
Soon after Balikatan 02-1, JTF-510 reorganized into a much leaner organization called the Joint Special Operations Task Force, Philippines (JSOTF-P), which continued advisory efforts with selected AFP units at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels (Figure 2).⁵⁵ Follow-on JSOTF-P advisers have pursued the same strategy, but with greatly reduced resources along some lines of operation.⁵⁶ The reorganization reflects a shift in focus to indigenous capacity-building efforts, with the deployment of advisory teams to particular AFP units near terrorist safe havens or transit points in the southern Philippines.

Characteristics

- *Advise and assist—all levels
- *Small footprint
- *Support and sustainability
- *Distributed ops
- *Low visibility
- *intelligence sharing
- *Find low tech solutions
- *Interagency coordination
- *Reachback
- *Leverage bilateral exercises
- *AFP leads/US supports

Lines of operation

- *Indigenous capacity building
- *Focused civil-military ops
- *Information ops



Legend: AFSOF, Air Force special operations forces; ARSOF, Army special operations forces; CRG, Contingency response group; DoS, Department of State; JSOTF, Joint special operations task force; LCE, Liaison coordination element; MIST, Mobile information support team; NAVSOF, Navy special operations forces; SOCPAC, Special Operations Component, United States Pacific Command; USEMB, U.S. Embassy.

Figure 2. Joint Special Operations Task Force, Philippines Advisory Model

Deployed at the tactical level, SF advisory teams called Liaison Coordination Elements (LCE) are small, tailored, autonomous teams of Special Operations personnel from all services.⁵⁷ They advise and assist select AFP units in planning and fusing all sources of intelligence in support of operations directed at insurgent-terrorist organizations.⁵⁸ LCEs conduct decentralized planning and execution using a robust reachback capability to the JSOTF to leverage additional assets in support of AFP operations. These assets range from intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets such as tactical unmanned aerial vehicles to humanitarian assistance to tailored information products.

The JSOTF has increasingly emphasized information operations that heighten public awareness of the negative effects of terrorism and provide ways to report terrorists to local security forces. Also featured are positive actions the government and military take to foster peace and development. The introduction of a Military Information Support Team in 2005 significantly enhanced the production of print and media products in support of US and Philippine Government WOT information objectives.⁵⁹ Products include newspaper ads, handbills, posters, leaflets, radio broadcasts, and novelty items (example at Figure 6). These IO efforts have helped to raise public awareness of the US Government’s rewards program.⁶⁰ Osama bin Laden’s

chief lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has said, “More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of Muslims.”⁶¹ If this is true, then shaping an environment less conducive to terrorist activity by raising public awareness is a true combat multiplier.



AFP/US public information product

Indirect Approach Advantages

With U.S. forces stretched to the breaking point globally, SF advisory efforts will become more attractive to U.S. policymakers in the future. These efforts have some marked advantages over unilateral military operations.⁶² Economy-of-force operations by nature, they are characterized by a small footprint, low resource requirements, and limited visibility. This makes them ideal to use in politically sensitive areas where a large foreign military presence would undermine the host-nation government’s legitimacy and serve to rally opposition extremist elements. Additionally, with their low profiles, SF advisory operations can usually be sustained for a long time, a distinct benefit during protracted struggles.⁶³ Operations in the Southern Philippines have been ongoing since 2002, and so far they have received very little attention from the U.S. media and public.

The SF advisory approach also creates a more favorable impression of U.S. military efforts. Advisers are much more politically acceptable than Soldiers who take a direct role in combat. Humanitarian and civic-action activities performed with indigenous forces demonstrate the U.S. and host-nation government’s commitment to promoting long-term peace and development. In 2002, U.S. advisers operating on Basilan went from seeing throat-slash hand gestures to receiving smiles and handshakes from local Muslims after the latter discovered the true nature of the SF’s activities.⁶⁴ In 2005, U.S. military forces received a hero’s welcome when they returned to Basilan for training exercises. The people repeatedly thanked them for their assistance during Balikatan 02-1.⁶⁵

This good word has spread to the neighboring island of Sulu, a notorious Abu Sayyaf and extremist stronghold. In 2005, the Sulu provincial government asked U.S. military and AFP officials to conduct the “Basilan Model” on their island during Balikatan 06.⁶⁶ Prior to the exercise, local Islamic religious leaders asked the Muslim populace of Sulu to welcome U.S. forces.⁶⁷ Patricio Abinales, Associate Professor at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, credits the American military presence in the Southern Philippines for contributing to the emergence of reformist leaders (especially former Moro rebels) and politicians identified with “moderate Islam” who represent a change in conduct from the “guns, goons, gold” custom associated with

traditional politicians.⁶⁸

A Regional Approach

A regionally networked approach will optimize U.S. efforts to build indigenous capacity. The enemy is part of a transnational global network and flows across borders in many regions of the world like Southeast Asia. Terrorists and insurgents use ungoverned areas to their advantage so that efforts by individual states alone will not be effective. The best way to confront a network is to create a counter-network, a non-hierarchical organization capable of responding quickly to actionable intelligence. The goal should be a networked regional capability that can seamlessly pass intelligence among SF advisory teams collocated with indigenous forces in strategic locations. In denied or unfriendly areas, surrogate forces developed and operating under the direction of SF and interagency partners should perform this task. As Steven Sloan notes, “The development of counter terrorist organizations that are small, flexible, and innovative cannot be done in the context of a unilateral approach to combating terrorism. There must be unity of action on the regional and international level that breaches the jurisdictional battles among countries that often seem to take precedence over an integrated war against terrorism.”⁶⁹ The U.S. Government, military, and people must understand that these long-duration efforts require patience and determination. Gaining access, fostering trust, building relationships, and developing an indigenous or surrogate military capacity can take years, and success can often be difficult to measure. SF advisory teams must deploy forward to access indigenous capability and develop the situation in critical areas near suspected terrorist safe havens and transit locations. Once they complete their assessments, more refined plans ranging from small-scale LCE operations to larger Basilan-type efforts can be developed. This strategy has the added benefit of being preventive instead of just reactive. Positioning SF advisory teams as “global scouts” forward will provide early warning and allow our policymakers to assist our partners in shaping a more favorable environment.

Basilan in Iraq?

The “Basilan Model” and follow-on U.S. efforts offer a template for a sustainable, low-visibility approach to supporting America’s allies in the WOT. In Iraq, where unilateral conventional operations have often been ineffective and even counterproductive, we should consider employing SF advisory teams on a large scale. Because they know the geography, language, and culture of the region and are skilled in working “by, with, and through” indigenous forces, SF is uniquely suited to adeptly navigate Iraq’s politically and culturally sensitive terrain to enable effective host-nation operations against our common enemies.

By itself, however, just building the host-nation’s capacity to capture or kill insurgents will not guarantee victory. The United States must employ a holistic approach that enhances the legitimacy of the host-nation government and its security forces in the eyes of the local populace. Using the Diamond Model, it must focus on the people at the grassroots level as the enemy’s center of gravity. Ultimately, we will win the “long war,” as the Quadrennial Defense Review now calls it, by gaining broader acceptance of U.S. policy within the moderate Muslim community. The best way to do this is by working in the shadows, “by, with, and through” indigenous or surrogate forces to marginalize the insurgents and win over the people. In an irony befitting the often paradoxical nature of counterinsurgency warfare, “the indirect approach” offers us the most direct path to victory.

1. John Arquilla and David F. Ronfeldt, "Netwar Revisited: The Fight for the Future Continues," in *Networks, Terrorism and Global Insurgency*, ed. Robert J. Bunker (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 9.
2. Daniel Byman, "Going to War with the Allies You Have: Allies, Counterinsurgency, and the War on Terrorism," Strategic Studies Institute (November 2005): 2.
3. Ibid., 5.
4. For insights on common problems with U.S. military COIN operations as observed by a senior officer in one of our closest allies in the WOT, see Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster, British Army, "Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations," *Military Review* (November-December 2005).
5. Kalev I. Sepp, "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (May-June 2005), and Byman, 2.
6. Robert D. Kaplan, "Imperial Grunts," *Atlantic Monthly Online*, October 2005, 2, <www.theatlantic.com/doc/200510/kaplan-us-special-forces/2>.
7. Aylwin-Foster, 4.
8. According to an Al-Qaeda fatwa delivered in 1996, "The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilian and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grips, and in order for their armies to move out of all lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim." Full text available online at <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html>.
9. Peter Bergen and Alec Reynolds, "Blowback Revisited," *Foreign Affairs* (November-December 2005): 4.
10. Zachary Abuza, "Balik Terrorism: The Return of the ASG [Abu Sayyaf Group]," Strategic Studies Institute (September 2005): 31.
11. John P. Sullivan, "Terrorism, Crime and Private Armies," in *Networks, Terrorism and Global Insurgency*, 72.
12. The Philippines were occupied by the Spanish from 1542 to 1898; the United States from 1898 to 1941; the Japanese from 1941 to 1944; and the United States again from 1944 to 1945. The United States granted the Philippines full independence in 1946.
13. Sean K. Anderson, "U.S. Counterinsurgency vs. Iranian-Sponsored Terrorism" in *Networks, Terrorism and Global Insurgency*, 85.
14. Abuza, 2.
15. Ibid., 5. Jamal Khalifa, Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law, was dispatched to the Philippines in 1991 and established a network of Islamic charities that have been linked to terrorist financing

in the region.

16. The Abu Sayyaf Group conducted numerous kidnappings prior to 9/11, but it is best known for kidnapping three American citizens, including a missionary couple, and several wealthy Filipino citizens from Dos Palmas Resort on the island of Palawan, 27 May 2001. ASG subsequently moved the hostages to Basilan Island.

17. The “indirect approach” was first advocated by British military theorist, journalist, and historian Basil Henry Liddell Hart to prevent a repeat of earlier trench warfare deadlock. His theory included a form of blitzkrieg using both tanks and infantry.

18. In 1994, Dr. Gordon McCormick created the triangle insurgent/COIN model. He later created the Diamond Model to capture the interaction with external international actors. See Gordon H. McCormick, “A ‘Pocket Guide’ to Internal War,” Department of Defense Analysis, Naval Postgraduate School, forthcoming.

19. Maria Ressa, *Seeds of Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 124.

20. Class notes from Dr. Gordon McCormick’s “Seminar on Guerilla Warfare,” Department of Defense Analysis, Naval Postgraduate School, October 2005.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Rick Webster, “Counterinsurgency: The John Paul Vann Model,” *Sitrep* (Winter/Spring 2004), <www.lists.opn.org/pipermail/org.opn.lists.vwar/2004-May/001227.html>.

24. Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 190.

25. McCormick, class notes.

26. For a more detailed discussion of applying strategic counterinsurgency models to the planning process, see LTC Eric Wendt, “Strategic Counterinsurgency Modeling,” *Special Warfare Magazine* (September 2005).

27. Close coordination with the ambassador, the Joint United States Military Assistance Group, the regional affairs team, local representatives of the United States Agency for International Development, the political-military adviser, and other key members of the country team will ensure unity of effort.

28. Joint Special Operations Task Force—Philippines (JSOTF-P) lines of operation were developed by the JSOTF-P and Special Operations Command, Pacific staff.

29. Balikatan means “shoulder to shoulder” in Tagalog. While the U.S. Government views OEF-P efforts in the Southern Philippines as military operations in a declared hostile-fire area, the Philippine Government describes them as training exercises to avoid perceived constitutional restrictions against foreign troops participating in internal combat operations.

30. COL Darwin Z. Guerra, “Peace-Building in Basilan: The Army’s 103rd Brigade Soldier’s

Final Battle,” unpublished, 1.

31. COL Dave Maxwell, “Operation Enduring Freedom—Philippines: What Would Sun Tzu Say?”, <www.army.mil/professionalwriting/volumes/volume2/june_2004/6_04_3.html>.

32. Wendt, 10-11.

33. Ibid.

34. Sepp, 9.

35. Maxwell, 1.

36. Cherilyn A. Walley, “Impact of the Semi-permissive Environment on Force-protection in the Philippines Engagement,” *Special Warfare*, 2004, 1, <www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0HZY/is_1_17/ai_n954388>.

37. Ibid., 4. Interview of an SF adviser by Dr. C. H. Briscoe.

38. MAJ Joe McGraw, SF Detachment Commander on Basilan during Balikatan 02-1, interview by the author, Monterey, CA, 19 January 2006. Training initially focused on basic individual infantry skills and progressed to more advanced collective skills. Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) units have very little training ammunition and rarely fire their weapons other than in combat situations.

39. C. H. Briscoe, “Reflections and Observations on ARSF [Army Special Forces] Operations during Balikatan 02-1,” *Special Warfare*, 2004, 1, <www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0HZY/is_1_17/ai_n9543891>.

40. Ibid., 1.

41. McGraw interview. SF advisers initially were not allowed to accompany AFP units below the battalion level during operations, but after a lengthy mission review process (CONOPS), advisers were allowed to work at company level toward the end of the operation.

42. “A ‘PACOM-imposed force cap’ on Army SF personnel and heavy weapons in the exercise area of operations constrained the use of CA [civil affairs] teams. That compelled the commander of Forward Operating Base 11 to task SF detachments with the CA mission.” C. H. Briscoe, 1.

43. Cherilyn A. Walley, “Civil Affairs: A Weapon of Peace on Basilan Island,” *Special Warfare*, 2004, 3. <www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0HZY/is_1_17/ai_n9543878>.

44. C. H. Briscoe, 1.

45. Ibid., 1.

46. Guerra, 2.

47. McGraw interview.

48. After security was reestablished during Balikatan 02-1, the Philippine Government, the Growth with Equity in Mindanao Program, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, and various nongovernmental organizations provided economic and developmental assistance to Basilan Island. The U.S. Government provided an average of \$80 million of economic and developmental assistance a year to the Philippines from 2002 to 2006, of which 60 percent was designated for the Mindanao region. See U.S. Department of State, Foreign Operations, Export Financing and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2006 (P. L. 109-102).
49. The ASG no longer poses a threat on Basilan. Its armed strength has fallen from an estimated 1,000 in 2002 to somewhere between 200 and 400 in 2005. Thomas Lum and Larry A. Niksch, "The Republic of the Philippines: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service Report to Congress, 10 January 2006, 8.
50. AFP forces deployed on Basilan improved their capacity while working directly with Army Special Forces during Balikatan 02-1. Follow-on security assistance train-and-equip modules and SF advisory efforts have continued to build AFP capabilities.
51. Balikatan 02-1 enabled the Philippine Government and AFP to reduce security forces on Basilan Island by 70 percent and transition to peace-building activities.
52. Sepp, 10.
53. Khaddafy Janjalani assumed leadership of the ASG after Abu Sabaya's death during an AFP-led, U.S.-assisted operation in June 2002.
54. Lum and Niksch, 7.
55. JSOTF-P has fluctuated between 50 and 300 personnel. Advisory teams interface at the strategic level with the U.S. Embassy in Manila and the AFP General Headquarters in Manila; at the operational level, with AFP Southern Command in Zamboanga; and at the tactical level, with select AFP combat units. Advisory teams also work with AFP civil affairs and psychological operations forces.
56. Humanitarian assistance and civic-action project funding was greatly reduced after Balikatan 02-1. Some funding was diverted to tsunami relief in 2005.
57. Liaison Coordination Elements generally consist of 4 to 12 SF advisers who are embedded with select AFP ground, naval, and air forces down to the battalion level.
58. JTF-510 advisory efforts were directed strictly at the ASG while JSOTF-P advisory efforts have expanded to include Jemaah Islamiyya.
59. This Military Information Support Team consists of psychological operations personnel who develop combined products with the AFP Civilian Relations Group. Products are approved through both AFP and U.S. chains of command.
60. U.S. Government rewards programs in the Philippines have led to the apprehension of 23 terrorists. Products are designed by AFP and U.S. personnel working together to ensure they are portrayed in the correct cultural context. Muslim soldiers within the AFP have played a key role

in this effort, translating products into native languages like Talsug.

61. Cited in a speech by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld to the Council on Foreign Relations, Harold Pratt House, New York, NY, 17 February 2006, <www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2006/sp20060217-12574.html>.

62. Stretched by frequent troop rotations to Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army has become a “thin green line” that could snap unless relief comes soon, according to Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Thin Green Line*, Report to the Pentagon, <msnbc.msn.com/id/11009829/>.

63. Sepp, 9. SF advisory efforts in El Salvador were conducted for over 12 years.

64. Robert Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts* (New York: Random House, 2005), 245.

65. Author’s experience on Basilan, March 2005.

66. Author’s experience on Sulu, February 2005.

67. Roel Pareno, “Sulu sultan leads Jolo rally backing Balikatan,” *Philippine Star*, 12 Feb 2005.

68. Patricio Abinales, “American Military Presence in the Southern Philippines: A Comparative Historical Overview,” *East-West Center Working Papers, Politics and Security Series 7*, (October 2004): 14.

69. Stephen Sloan, “Forward: Responding to the Threat,” in *Networks, Terrorism and Global Insurgency*, xxi.

Note: This article is from the November-December 2006 edition of *Military Review* and can be found on its Web site at <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20061231_art004.pdf>.

**The World Looking Over Their Shoulders:
Australian Strategic Corporals On Operations In East Timor**

Dr. Bob Breen and LTCOL Greg McCauley

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Preface

Who are strategic corporals and why write about them? They are junior military leaders whose judgment, personal conduct and tactical decisions on operations may have a strategic significance that reaches far beyond their individual actions. That strategic significance can rebound from both good and bad decisions.

The outcomes of error can vary from the embarrassment of adverse media attention, the alienation of the local populace, or the outbreak of war with a neighbouring country. Conversely, the fruits of success can range from the projection of positive images of military intervention to viewers and commentators around the world, to the defeat of hostile groups thereby granting downtrodden and traumatised families hope for the future. These are junior soldiers with extraordinary influence.

The era of conscripted junior leaders and small teams lining up in formations under tight control to attack similar formations of opposing junior leaders and small teams is over. The war against jihadists, fought on the terrain of the Information Age, has placed corporals not only in dangerous and politically complex battlespaces, but on a world stage. Corporals now deploy on operations accompanied by media representatives who bring with them a global audience. At every turn, those corporals have the world looking over their shoulders. While many of their successes and failures will remain unknown, ultimately their good and bad decisions may shape history.

General Charles C. Krulak, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, coined the term ‘strategic corporal’ in 1999 to acknowledge the importance of corporals during modern ‘three block’ land operations. It is this interaction between corporals and soldiers and the local populace—with whom they will probably share neither a common language nor cultural and religious values—that will decide who will succeed in fourth generation warfare in the future.

Understanding the work of corporals and their small teams remains critical. Their success or failure, in turn, determines higher level success or failure. It has been ever thus. In conventional land warfare, large-scale attacks involving thousands of troops, battlefield manoeuvre and significant firepower are ultimately contests between opposing junior leaders and small teams. Detailed rules of engagement (ROE) apply to all post-Cold War land operations. Corporals and their troops establish a deterrent presence and then engage hostile individuals and opposing groups, as well as anyone who threatens public order, with carefully calibrated persuasion, coercion and, occasionally, lethal force.

History can inform the future. The deployment of an Australian advance guard of 2500 troops to Dili, East Timor, in September 1999 was the largest Australian deployment since World War II. Australia’s national interests were at stake. Australian corporals held the future of Indonesian and Australian relations in their hands. They found themselves in a lawless city in a highly provocative environment that was further complicated by renegade members of Indonesia’s

armed forces running amok while other Indonesian forces worked to assist them in calming the situation. In 2006 Australian troops were back in Dili amongst a newly independent people who were on the brink of civil war. Amidst provocation from criminal gangs and violent ethnic groups as well as mutinous soldiers and police, Australian corporals had to ensure that their responses calmed rather than aggravated unexpected events.

East Timor Bound

On 5 May 1999, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced that there would be a ‘popular consultation’ in East Timor in August of that year. The Indonesian Government had offered to grant the province of East Timor special autonomy within Indonesia. If the majority of East Timorese voted ‘no’, and the Indonesian Parliament endorsed the result, then the United Nations (UN) would be invited to assist with the transition of East Timor to nationhood. This was a sudden and unexpected turnaround in the fortunes of the East Timorese.

The scene was set for violence. East Timorese pro-integration and pro-independence factions were preparing for an inevitable clash. Elements of Indonesia’s security forces, members of East Timorese territorial battalions and newly formed militia units were also expected to intimidate pro-independence East Timorese. Hostile groups were expected to confront UN mission staff, electoral officers, East Timorese UN staff and media representatives. Given the circumstances, it was highly likely that Indonesian security forces would be preoccupied with settling the unrest and thus unable to provide security for an emergency evacuation of UN personnel. Staff at headquarters ADF began discussing the possibility that the UN might seek Australian assistance to evacuate its staff from East Timor. Contingency planning for an ADF-led evacuation operation in East Timor nicknamed SPITFIRE began amid tight secrecy in June 1999.

Soon after the UN mission, known as UN Assistance Mission–East Timor (UNAMET) began arriving in East Timor, a pattern of militia violence and concurrent complacency from Indonesian security forces became apparent. LTCOL Paul Symon, the commander of a small group of Australian military liaison officers assigned to UNAMET, became increasingly concerned about the security of UNAMET personnel, particularly those in outlying towns. These developments prompted further contingency planning in Canberra. MAJGEN Peter Cosgrove, Commander of the Deployable Joint Force headquarters based in Brisbane, joined the planning.

By the end of July ADF planners had prepared a two-phased operation in East Timor. Phase 1 was an emergency evacuation in a volatile environment. In this phase, Australian forces would have to be capable of lodging in Dili and securing the port and airfield. Helicopters would then fly to outlying centres such as Baucau and Liquica to pick up evacuees for movement from Dili to Darwin. Phase 2 would involve the establishment of safe havens in East Timor for a period of time until UN forces could be dispatched to create a secure environment for the restoration of law and order.

By the third week in August, Australia’s Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, was stating publicly that the East Timorese were likely to vote against autonomy by a significant margin. At the same time, media representatives in East Timor, pro-independence leaders and most analysts were predicting that there would be an outbreak of violence once the result was announced. On 26 August, Defence Minister John Moore ordered the Chief of the Defence Force, ADML Chris Barrie, to pre-position forces in northern Australia for Operation SPITFIRE.

On 30 August, 78 per cent of those who had registered for the ballot in East Timor voted to reject the Indonesian Government’s offer of autonomy. Within hours of the announcement of the

election result on 4 September, marauding militia gangs began to sack East Timor and terrorise the population. From all around East Timor there were reports of Indonesian soldiers and police standing by while militia fired their weapons in a threatening manner and attacked those they suspected of being pro-independence supporters. Widespread violence was already erupting when Ian Martin, head of UNAMET, announced the ballot result. The media in East Timor did not report widespread celebrations: there were none. The East Timorese knew what they would face.

The eruption of violence and destruction in East Timor became a day-to-day focus for the national and international media and the Australian Government in the days following Martin's announcement. Comprehensive coverage of the worsening situation in East Timor by the Australian media aroused public outrage. Australian journalists, photographers and camera crews ignored militia threats and, risking injury and death, went out day after day to broadcast to the world what was happening in East Timor. The contest between the media and the militia intensified daily. Those directing the militia violence underestimated the power of the stories and images being broadcast around the world to arouse international outrage. Politicians responded to the anger of their constituents by calling for an international military force to be sent to East Timor immediately.

The crucial decision during this period rested with Indonesian President Habibie who wrestled with the dilemma of whether to invite the UN to intervene. General Wiranto, Commander-in-Chief of the Indonesian Armed Forces, maintained a consistent public position that security in East Timor remained the responsibility of his forces. Coincidentally, the annual meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Community in New Zealand allowed the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, and his Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, to gather a coalition of countries including the United States (US), to lobby the Indonesian Government to invite the intervention of international military forces.

Habibie now declared martial law in East Timor. Expatriate UN employees began to leave. From 7–12 September, Australian military transport aircraft evacuated over 2700 people. The evacuees included a number of East Timorese whom UN staff had refused to leave behind to an uncertain fate at the hands of militia groups. While the evacuation proceeded, militia groups continued to loot and burn Dili and regional towns. Thousands of East Timorese fled into the hills around towns and villages to face hardship and uncertainty. There were reports of thousands of East Timorese being herded onto ships and taken against their will to West Timor and other parts of Indonesia.

The militia were now isolated and exposed to a hostile international community keen to make them account for their crimes against humanity. Their Indonesian controllers had let them run amok and did not appear to be able—or willing—to restrain them. By 12 September it had become abundantly clear that martial law was failing to halt the internecine violence. International pressure continued to mount. There were media reports that billions of dollars of International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans promised to Indonesia were being reviewed in light of the Indonesian security forces' inability or unwillingness to halt the violence in East Timor. Those who were taking revenge on the East Timorese people for voting for independence had gone too far. Their actions were seriously damaging Indonesia's reputation and jeopardising the loans required to assist in the recovery of Indonesia's damaged economy following the 1998 Asian meltdown.

By 12 September the ADF had positioned ships, aircraft and the Army's 3rd Brigade in readiness for deployment to East Timor. The 3rd Brigade Group consisted of a light infantry and an airborne battalion supported by light armoured vehicles and battlefield helicopters. Having taken command of evacuation operations, MAJGEN Cosgrove and his headquarters were ready to accept assignment of additional ADF forces and to command international forces should they also be assigned.

On 12 September Indonesia finally succumbed to the weight of international pressure. President Habibie faced a large gathering of international media representatives and announced that he had invited the UN to dispatch an international force to assist in restoring security in East Timor. The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1264 on 15 September authorising the International Force–East Timor (INTERFET) to take necessary action to restore peace and security in East Timor, to facilitate humanitarian assistance, and to protect and support UNAMET.

In the following days MAJGEN Cosgrove was appointed commander of INTERFET. Concurrently, ADF forces earmarked for the original Operation SPITFIRE became an advance guard for an international military intervention into East Timor named Operation STABILISE. Behind the scenes Australian diplomats and Defence attachés around the world sought contributions to INTERFET.

At the time of its inception, the 3rd Brigade in Townsville *was* INTERFET. BRIG Mark Evans chose to take the 2nd Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR), from Townsville and was assigned the 3rd Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR). LTCOL Simon Gould's 5th/7th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (5/7 RAR), was assigned for later deployment. C Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, had been warned some time before and was ready to go. This would be the first overseas mission for the new Australian-modified Light Armoured vehicles (ASLAv).

Over the next week the 3rd Brigade packed up and prepared for movement by road to Darwin and air to Dili. On 20 September, 3rd Brigade diggers, along with some small assigned international contingents, began arriving in Dili by air. The next day the remainder began arriving by sea. The scene was set for a confrontation between the Australians and militia gangs and possibly also renegade Indonesian soldiers. Strategic corporals now held Australia's relations with Indonesia and Australia's international and regional reputation in their hands.

Chesting Up in Dili

The first C-130 aircraft into Dili carried elements of LTCOL Mick Slater's 2 RAR: A and C rifle companies and two APCs. The infantrymen were keyed up and expecting trouble. On arrival they were met by Australian special forces guides. While MAJ Dick Parker's A Company (Coy) secured the airfield, Indonesian trucks transported MAJ Jim Bryant's C Coy to the port. There they were met by Indonesian Marines who were in the midst of assisting about 2000 East Timorese to board ships. There were Indonesian soldiers among the displaced East Timorese. They seethed with barely concealed resentment, glaring in hostility at the Australian troops. The special forces guides told Bryant that there were militiamen in the crowd. The Australians watched the militia and Marines closely for any overt sign of hostility.

The East Timorese at the port were in a wretched state. Tens of thousands of their compatriots had preceded them over the previous weeks. The port area was covered in rubbish and human and animal faeces. A gut-churning stench pervaded the whole area. There was insufficient water, food, shelter or sanitation. The East Timorese waited uncomplaining with their belongings and

crying children. Until the Australians arrived they had been subjected to bullying by Marines and roving militiamen. This now stopped as the East Timorese observed an uneasy stand-off between Bryant's infantrymen and the Indonesian Marines.

Bryant and his men settled in. The Indonesian Marines were coldly formal towards them as they shared security duties. Other groups of Indonesian soldiers and East Timorese territorial soldiers accompanied by armed militia began to provoke the Australians. Every now and again trucks would drive along the main road past the port at high speed. They were full of soldiers accompanied by militia, sporting red and white bandanas and brandishing weapons. The occupants of the trucks yelled death threats, made cut-throat gestures with their hands across their necks and occasionally fired volleys in the air before disappearing down the road. Initially this was unsettling for the Australians who were ready to return fire; however, they soon assessed that they were in no danger of being attacked, but were being tested by undisciplined thugs who had more bravado than bravery. The Australians knew their best option was to maintain disciplined vigilance and not be drawn into an incident that might begin an escalation of hostilities as the sun went down.

That first night continued to be punctuated by trucks full of provocative armed militiamen and Indonesian soldiers hurtling around Dili shouting threats and firing their weapons in the air. The Australians, adopting their pre-planned positions around Dili, remained cool and vigilant. In many cases their ROE would have permitted them to open fire when weapons were pointed at them and 'mock fired' in a dangerous rendition of a children's game of cowboys and Indians. The provocations were immature and foolhardy, by no means the actions of professional military forces. The hoodlums in the trucks did not seem to understand that every Australian infantryman and cavalryman could see them clearly at night. Their mistaken belief that the speed of their trucks and the cover of darkness afforded them protection. Their provocations may well have been motivated by a desire to show off in front of their comrades. It was a dangerous and foolish game, however, that could easily have ended in bloodshed and loss of life—their lives.

The first 24 hours in Dili constituted a test of stamina and determination. Helmets, flak jackets, webbing, gas masks strapped to legs and big packs crammed with over two hundred rounds of ammunition, three days' rations and up to ten litres of water weighed down the soldiers who patrolled to their first objectives after arrival. Perspiration poured from the soldiers' heads and bodies under their helmets, jackets and webbing. Remarkably, very few soldiers succumbed to heat stress. Every man was driven forward by adrenalin and a fierce desire to perform well as individuals. Loyalty and commitment to their mates in their small teams drove these men on. Many soldiers reported later that they felt a great deal of pride in the way they performed to the best of their ability, without a murmur of complaint or a moment of hesitation. Many officers felt privileged to witness such a high level of commitment from their troops to accomplish their critical task. Many described the environment in Dili as surreal. Smoke, stench and dust filled nostrils and stung eyes. Buildings had become fiery infernos or smouldering black shells. Rubbish, shit and abandoned personal items were everywhere as was the occasional dead dog. For some Dili resembled a city that had been hit with a nuclear bomb. There were very few East Timorese on the streets. Individuals darted here and there—no one walked.

Dili at night was even more bizarre and dangerous. The night sky had a smoky red glow and the night itself was punctuated with the sounds of gunfire, burning buildings and explosions. Long convoys of trucks crammed with Indonesian soldiers clutching their personal belongings and loot rolled through the streets. The tense, unpredictable situation over-stimulated INTERFET troops, leaving them edgy, apprehensive, sleepless and alert.

Dili was now a very dangerous place and the strategic stakes were high. Renegade Indonesian troops and militia gangs, responsible for the violence and mayhem, were now under immense pressure. The Indonesian Army had ordered them to leave Dili and East Timor. They were humiliated, angry and armed. Indonesian Army units from Java had arrived to facilitate their reluctant withdrawal, although they appeared uninterested in preventing the destructive rampages of the militia gangs. The only real opposition to the gangs came from the INTERFET troops. The tactical question lay in whether their wanton, vengeful behaviour would result in a clash. The strategic question concerned whether the Indonesian Army units from Java would intervene to protect them or join them once a firefight had started.

On the brink

On their second night in Dili, MAJ Jim Bryant's C Coy set up three vehicle checkpoints about a kilometre apart on the main east-west road through Dili in order to trap militia moving at night and to deter the 'drive-by' abuse from the speeding trucks. Bryant received orders to detain anyone armed but not in uniform for further questioning. Mick Slater assigned six ASLAVs to form two-vehicle herringbone obstacles at each vehicle checkpoint. These vehicle obstacles would force cars and trucks to slow down and zigzag between the armoured vehicles to get through. No truck driver would argue with a .50 calibre machine-gun. Bryant allocated an assault pioneer section and a sniper pair to each of his three rifle platoons.

At around 2200, the 745th East Timorese Territorial Battalion accompanied by Indonesian officers and NCOs drove into Dili. They were travelling in a convoy of about sixty trucks crammed with 600 soldiers and stolen goods, having murdered, burnt and pillaged their way from Bacau. They were heading directly for Slater's checkpoints. The Indonesian authorities had neglected to warn INTERFET that this large body of troops was arriving in Dili that night. Vehicle control points, intended to stop a truck or two now encountered over sixty vehicles. In the vanguard of this battalion were around twenty outriders on motorbikes. These men wore an assortment of bandanas, T-shirts, singlets and camouflage trousers. Many had long, unkempt hair and beards. Each had a rifle slung over his back.

LT Steve Casey's platoon positioned at the eastern checkpoint was the first to encounter these East Timorese road pirates. An Australian linguist asked them for their military identification cards, informing them that the Australians had orders to detain any armed persons not in uniform and who did not have suitable identification. While several riders revved their engines and glared with menace, the leader demanded to be allowed through immediately. Behind the motorcyclists, trucks began to slow down and stop. Soldiers from the rear trucks began to dismount and move forward asking why the convoy was held up. Minutes ticked by and the tension increased.

As the leader of the outriders continued to negotiate, the remainder of Casey's platoon and the assault pioneers strolled over to support their platoon commander. They quickly assessed that they were outnumbered, outgunned and the situation was deteriorating rapidly. Most of the Australians were equipped with night vision goggles and all wore flak jackets. They could see the area clearly. The territorials in the trucks overlooking the scene were bathed in darkness and, assuming they could not be seen, raised their weapons and pointed them towards the Australians.

The Australian infantrymen held their weapons down at their sides but pointed their muzzles up at those in the trucks who had raised their weapons. Their laser designators formed bright green spots on the chests and heads of the unwary territorial soldiers. Any sign that the territorials were about to raise their weapons and pull their triggers would instantly attract a volley of 5.56-mm

rounds. The Australian cavalymen had also trained their .50 calibre machine-guns on the line of trucks. Undetected on top of a bus shelter the snipers moved their sight pictures from head to head as they assessed the danger to Casey and his men.

Casey's signaller, PTE James Kent, was describing the scene over his radio to Bryant who now had an important decision to make. Would he let the motorbikes and trucks through or tell Casey to pull them over to be screened in the search area? Realising that the situation could escalate into a very dangerous stand-off or, worse still, a deadly gun battle, he decided to let the convoy proceed through to the next checkpoint, where he could personally assess the situation. This allowed him not only to diffuse the situation at the first checkpoint, but gave him the luxury of time to seek guidance from his battalion commander. While Bryant contacted Slater, the motorbikes and trucks zig-zagged past the ASLAVs and drove towards the next checkpoint.

A second confrontation quickly ensued at Bryant's checkpoint. This time the outriders were more aggressive and those in the trucks behind them became more resentful at being stopped a second time. LT Peter Hallday and his platoon repeated what had occurred at Casey's checkpoint, facing raised voices and raised weapons. While laser beams lit up the territorials a second time, Bryant received word that he was to let the battalion through without further delay. Slater had consulted BRIG Mark Evans who assessed the danger and directed that the territorials should not be delayed any further. Calling out abusively and brandishing their weapons, the territorials drove down the road, through the next checkpoint and on to West Timor.

These confrontations brought Australian and Indonesian troops to the brink of what could have escalated into a major gun-battle. The sounds of firing at the Australian vehicle checkpoints may have prompted hundreds of Indonesian troops to rush out of their barracks and provided them an excuse to join the fight. Indonesian ships and a submarine in the vicinity may also have intervened as Australian ships sailed towards the port to unload ammunition. Indonesian jets based in Kupang in West Timor could have flown to Dili to prevent Australian and international C-130 transport aircraft flying in reinforcements and more ammunition. The possibilities for a grave escalation in violence were real and threatened bloodshed on a massive scale.

The pressing tactical question centred on whether tired and threatened Australian junior leaders and small teams could maintain their fire discipline while they rightfully and legally asserted a strong deterrent presence and protected East Timorese civilians from further violence and intimidation. Hostile groups were provoking them in ways that entitled them to retaliate with fire for their own self-protection. They could also fire to protect others.

Helping out

On the fourth day of the lodgment, a truck full of Indonesian Army personnel, East Timorese territorials and militia drove past a machine-gun post near the Dili Sports Stadium. The Australians were now used to being taunted, but watched the truck closely. Suddenly three East Timorese men threw themselves from the speeding truck and landed about thirty metres from the machine-gun post. Two had broken limbs and lay bleeding on the road in agony. The third got to his feet and hobbled in great pain towards the Australians. The truck stopped and reversed back down the road. The section commander, CPL Andrew Higgins, went forward with several diggers to help the injured men, at the same time keeping an eye on the truck.

As Higgins and his diggers reached the men, several occupants in the truck called out and gestured that the Australians should go away and that they would retrieve the injured men.

The hobbling man made it clear that he did not want to be handed over to the men in the truck. Foolishly, several of those in the truck began to raise their weapons. Higgins and his men knew the drill. Their weapons came up, safety catches went off and they took sight pictures. They shouted out in Bahasa for the territorials and militia on the truck to drop their weapons. The Australians were not bluffing and the Indonesians and East Timorese in the truck quickly realised this. Higgins, who had only returned from serving in Bosnia a few weeks before deploying with 3 RAR to East Timor, and his men were itching for one of the men in the truck to make a false move. They were *not* going to return the three injured men.

This stand-off ended in seconds. Someone in the truck called out to the driver to move on. Weapons were lowered as the truck pulled away. After receiving medical treatment, the three men reported that they had been seized by militia outside Dili and forced burn buildings. The militia threatened to kill them and their families if they did not comply. They had jumped from the speeding truck to surrender to INTERFET rather than stay with their kidnappers.

CPL Higgins and his men had achieved the right balance between aggression and compassion. Had they allowed those in the truck to retrieve the injured East Timorese, they would have abrogated their humanitarian duty. Had they opened fire when provoked, while not technically breaching the ROE, the negative consequences of this action could have been substantial for the INTERFET mission and would certainly have increased tensions in Dili. The Australians did not succumb to their understandable anger and contempt for the behaviour of those in the truck and initiate a fight. But they were certainly ready to win a fight initiated by their opponents, had one of the men in the truck been foolish enough to fire a shot in the hope of frightening the Australians into backing down.

Asserting control

BRIG Mark Evans, Commander of the 3rd Brigade, ordered high tempo patrol activity around Dili, both on the ground and in the air, to deter hostile action against his forces and returning East Timorese. He set out to dominate the streets around the clock by clearing the suburbs—street by street, building by building, and house by house. The Australians detained anyone behaving suspiciously.

In the meantime, there was nowhere for the militia and those controlling them to hide in Dili itself. INTERFET troops were now not alone in their sleeplessness. Infantrymen and paratroopers stormed houses and buildings frequented by militia at all times of the day and night. Blackhawks and light observation helicopters spotted armed militiamen in the streets and open areas by day and night. Quick reaction forces responded to sightings and incidents. Numbers of detainees increased, as did the information they divulged. Fresh intelligence sparked further clearing operations that snared more detainees. More information prompted increased house and building searches. The militia could no longer operate with impunity. INTERFET was establishing its dominance and there were no soft targets or easy opportunities for low risk, hit-and-run or drive-by shootings.

On the fifth day, Evans assessed that the time was right to turn up the heat on those who had declared to the media that they would kill INTERFET soldiers and ‘eat their hearts’. Evans launched a massive cordon and search of the city using his two Australian battalions, the 200-strong Gurkha contingent from Brunei, and all of his light armoured vehicles and his helicopters. He planned to squash the militia between a hammer and an anvil.

Evans' primary objective was to break the will of militia groups to stay in Dili and the surrounding area. He also wanted to demand, and then to command, the respect of Indonesian and territorial battalions still located in barracks in Dili. Some Indonesian commanders continued to assume that they could act as they wished in Dili based on the fact that they outnumbered INTERFET almost fifteen to one. Trucks carrying shouting territorials and militia still barrelled around the streets at night and sometimes during the day. These actions endangered both the individuals themselves and Indonesian–Australian relations in risking an accidental escalation of violence that could lead to war.

INTERFET had a UN mandate to restore peace and security using whatever means necessary. Evans planned to exercise this mandate. He placed a cordon of personnel and light armoured vehicles along a north-south axis, east of the city limits, while simultaneously erecting a north-south cordon on the western limits of the city. He then directed an extended line of two companies of paratroopers, supported by ASLAVs and APCs, to sweep from west to east across the city on a broad front. H hour was 1230, the hottest part of the day, when many Indonesians and East Timorese would be taking a siesta. This timing would achieve surprise and maximise shock. All operations were to finish at exactly 1600 to demonstrate that INTERFET could turn on operations at short notice and then turn them off instantly. As they moved through the city, the paratroopers, accompanied by engineers, destroyed all Indonesian roadblocks.

Evans directed that all available rotary wing and fixed wing aircraft should deploy above the city. He wanted to demonstrate air superiority, mobility, observation and, even though they were only installed for self-protection, some aerial firepower, by having loadmasters man the two machine-guns mounted on the Blackhawks in an offensive manner reminiscent of the air force door gunners of the Vietnam War. Helicopters were directed to fly low and hard across the city looking for any opposition to the advancing line of paratroopers and light armoured vehicles.

Many of those who participated in this operation enjoyed the exhilaration of an unfettered show of force. Armoured vehicles sped from fire position to fire position on the ground, Blackhawks flew low and fast, swinging their machineguns in a menacing arc and paratroopers pushed through briskly and thoroughly, combing every street with weapons at the ready. Reconnaissance helicopters monitored their assigned areas, reporting back and investigating any suspicious sighting by flying in low and hard. Blackhawks also hovered in the sky with snipers aboard keeping an eye on any individuals or groups who might oppose their comrades on the ground. The Australians derived great satisfaction not only from demonstrating their combat power to the remaining militia in Dili but also to the remnant Indonesian soldiers who watched resentfully.

One of the most important features of this assertive operation was the fire discipline of junior leaders and small teams. There must have been enormous temptation to shoot at anything suspicious, both with serious intent and also to relieve the pent-up tension of several days' provocation and witnessing the wanton arson and other mindless violence. There was considerable potential for young Australian troops to become belligerent given the excitement of finally being able to move through in large numbers with power and aggression, hunting for those illegally bearing arms.

Following the cordon and search on 24 September, there was a significant decline in the incidence of truckloads of Indonesian military personnel and militia driving around provoking INTERFET troops on guard and on patrol. The acts of arson, however, continued sporadically and Indonesian military vehicles were still entitled to move around the city freely. There was mounting evidence that some of these vehicles were being used to carry drums of fuel that could

be dropped quickly in buildings and homes and left with slow burning wicks. Some time after the drums had been dropped off with their wicks lit; they would explode and engulf the structure in a spectacular firestorm.

To the rescue

On 26 September, six days after the lodgment, Australian Special Forces prepared to respond to an unfolding human tragedy in Com on the eastern tip of East Timor. Several hundred East Timorese were herded onto the wharf at Com in preparation for their forced deportation to West Timor. Commanders of the Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste (FALINTIL) pro-independence guerrilla force advised HQ INTERFET that they were going to intervene at Com to rescue their compatriots. MAJGEN Cosgrove and his staff assessed that this situation could escalate if Indonesian Army units intervened on behalf of militia groups to attack FALINTIL forces, their long standing opponents in East Timor.

MAJ Jim McMahon was appointed to command the rescue force. GEN Cosgrove assigned him Blackhawks and HMAS ADELAIDE in support. A rifle coy with helicopter support was put on sixty minutes' notice to move should McMahon require reinforcement. He and his troopers flew to the vicinity of Com and approached the town on foot just after last light. He found approximately 2500 East Timorese with armed militia guards moving amongst them. He contacted militia leaders and gave them an ultimatum that if they did not come out of the port compound and surrender to him, his force would move in and arrest them. After a group of unarmed men who were clearly not militia was pushed out of the compound to 'surrender' to him as a ploy, McMahon gave the militia leader until 0100 before the Australians would enter the compound and arrest him and his men. Several hours went by before McMahon's men noticed a group of twenty four armed men sneaking out of the compound, headed for a truck. McMahon ordered his men to surround them. These militiamen, unaware that they were being observed through night vision goggles, assembled around the truck, ready to clamber on. McMahon's men, under the additional cover of snipers, crept up and formed a fifty-man ring around the militia and the truck at a distance of ten paces. On order, several of McMahon's men shone torches on the group and called for them to drop their weapons. The surprise was complete. The militiamen were shocked to find themselves surrounded and quickly surrendered their weapons. The Australians arrested twenty-four militiamen, including their leader, and captured SKS rifles, small arms and a large quantity of ammunition.

McMahon and the members of his force performed superbly during the raid at Com. With only thirty minutes' notice to move and a mission to 'stop the fighting at Com', he and the Blackhawks had arrived at last light and managed to execute a plan based on a very quick assessment of the situation. Their mission was achieved with cunning and, significantly, without a shot being fired. A bloody conflict had been avoided between FALINTIL guerrillas and the militia and over 2000 displaced persons were now free to return home. INTERFET had demonstrated its capability to deploy troops, aircraft and ships quickly, over some distance, and with sufficient discipline to accomplish its mission without the application of lethal force. At the cutting edge of this rescue mission, junior leaders and their men maintained fire discipline. How easy would have been to a fire on the militia group that they surrounded in the dark that night?

On to the next phase

By the end of September, Cosgrove was ready to push the 3rd Brigade up to the western border. The achievements of INTERFET over the first ten days had been significant. Dili, the political and spiritual centre of East Timor was now secure. INTERFET had also achieved an important psychological victory. Renegade territorial battalions had been pushed over the border into West Timor accompanied by hundreds of militia and their controllers. They did not have the stomach for a fight. They had sought opportunities for low risk hit-and-run raids but had found no soft, easy targets. Their actions did not match their bloodthirsty rhetoric.

INTERFET was now replete with logistic assets, combat troops and air and ground mobility, ready to seal the western border between East Timor and West Timor. Contributing nations had monitored INTERFET's successful lodgment and the crucial first ten days of security operations. Clearly they liked what they saw.

They were now ready to join INTERFET and continue the campaign to restore peace and security to East Timor. Had there been an accidental clash between Australian troops and renegade Indonesian troops, or East Timorese auxiliaries in Dili, other nations may have found reasons to delay the dispatch of their contingents. Australia would have had to 'face the music' virtually alone with only the initial small special forces contingents from Britain and New Zealand and a company group of Gurkhas to support them on the ground. It would probably have taken several days or weeks for international pressure to be brought to bear to bring fighting to an end. Australia's strategic corporals had done their job and avoided a strategic nightmare.

Securing the Border

A tough, scrub infantry battalion of the old school, the 2 RAR motto, 'second to none' aptly represented the diggers' fierce pride in themselves and the way they performed. After ten days in Dili, LTCOL Mick Slater and his men looked forward to putting urban security operations behind them and getting into the bush. They sought the freedom to dominate their own area, and to find and detain any militia still causing trouble. GEN Cosgrove also deployed a strong special forces reconnaissance group to push out ahead of 2 RAR to clear routes, locate any remaining militia groups and report back. They moved by road in their specialised patrol vehicles known as 'gun buggies', supported by Australian light armoured vehicles and Blackhawk helicopters.

This move to the border continued the strategic risk of an accidental clash between Australian and Indonesian armed forces. The Indonesian Army would rightfully guard the sovereignty of Indonesian territory, and rapidly moving Australian forces had to be careful not to cross the border in pursuit of militia groups. They also had to ensure that their navigation was accurate to the last detail. The other significant risk involved isolated Australian forces stretched along the border, resupply convoys and other logistic targets subjected to hit-and-run attacks by militia groups. Militarily, these attacks might be inconsequential; however, they had the potential to become media stories with far-reaching political consequences that could serve to tarnish INTERFET's reputation and reduce its psychological advantage over the militia and their controllers. BRIG Evans was particularly focused on ensuring that his troops maintained their pressure on the militia to push them out of East Timor or deter them from infiltrating from West Timor. This was more a battle of wills and fear of consequences than a contest of armed force.

First border contest at Suai

The first test between INTERFET and the militia on the border occurred at Suai at the southern end of the border on 6 October. Having received information from local sources that there was a large group of militia in Suai, MAJ Jim McMahon, commander of the special forces reconnaissance force, was able to surprise them and apprehend them by simultaneously cutting them off with troops in helicopters while another group mounted in light armoured vehicles and gun buggies swept through from a different direction.

McMahon and his men loaded over a hundred detainees into the trucks they had been travelling in and set out for Dili so that the detainees could be questioned further and screened. About four kilometres out of Suai a small group of militia sprung a hasty ambush. Opening shots hit two Australians, one in the neck and one in the leg. The Australian troopers in the trucks returned fire and kept the attackers pinned down while McMahon and his headquarters, supported by a group commanded by CAPT Jon Hawkins, rushed into position on a flank and swept through with massed fire. Two militiamen were killed in this sweep, with two more wounded men escaping. They were later reported to have died of their wounds. McMahon called off the pursuit and returned to Suai with his force to arrange the safe evacuation of his two seriously wounded men. The convoy was fired at once more on the way back to Suai but an aggressive, immediate response put the attackers to flight. McMahon stayed on in Suai to deter militia groups from returning. Those who had been apprehended were moved to Dili in convoy without incident.

The highly trained Australian Special Forces had been swift, agile and decisive in their contest with the ambushers. Their strong and aggressive response when fired upon was a superb example of effective counter-ambush tactics. Events further north a few days later would demonstrate that, under different circumstances, a strong and aggressive response would not only be inappropriate, but could also be strategically disastrous.

Once again to the brink

Aside from the Suai shoot-out, the border region remained quiet for the next few days. On 10 October, MAJ Jim Bryant, C Coy, 2 RAR, based at Batugade at the northern end of the border, received reports that there were militia in Motaain, a village located further west of Batugade several hundred metres inside East Timor. He decided to investigate. He pushed nineteen-year-old Peter Halleday's platoon forward and followed with his Coy headquarters, accompanied by MAJ David Kilcullen, Support Coy, who was a fluent Bahasa speaker. As the Australians approached the border area an Indonesian officer saw them coming and moved forward to warn them not to move closer as, based on his map, they were only a few hundred metres away from the border and were about to cross into West Timor. Indonesian police and Army personnel observing the approach of Halleday's platoon appeared to have mistaken his patrol for an assault formation. Before the Indonesian officer could make contact, several other Indonesians in the vicinity opened fire on the Australians. Most of this fire was directed at CPL Paul Teong's section which completed its automatic contact drill—run, down, crawl, observe, aim and decide—providing target information, taking aim and awaiting direction. Teong and others identified the locations of those firing at them and he ordered his men to return fire. This opening burst killed one Indonesian policeman and seriously wounded two others. The Indonesian fire paused. Teong ordered his men to cease firing and to watch their front—the disciplined response of a well trained section.

After shouted assurances that there would be no more firing, Bryant and Kilcullen met with Indonesian officers and began discussions about the incident. Almost immediately it became clear that the Australians had a recent Indonesian map that showed Motaain inside East Timor and the Indonesians had an old Dutch map that placed the town in West Timor. The Australians had approached within a few hundred metres of a dated and now-incorrect line of border markers that the Indonesians relied on and had manned accordingly. It had been a very close call. The misunderstanding at Motaain sparked high-level concern. Senior Indonesian officers accused INTERFET troops of crossing into West Timor and opening fire on Indonesian troops. Cosgrove responded firmly that his troops had been fired on by Indonesian security personnel while they were in East Timor and that they possessed sophisticated Global Positioning Satellite navigation technology that prevented them making navigational errors. Fortunately, several journalists and an Australian Defence camera crew with Bryant's Coy verified that the Indonesians had opened fire first and that the Australians had demonstrated professional fire discipline in the face of an unprovoked hail of bullets.

CPL Paul Teong joined the ranks of Australia's strategic corporals. He had exercised sound judgment in a dangerous situation with potentially serious strategic consequences. A less disciplined group of soldiers might have returned large volumes of panicky fire to protect themselves. Teong appeared to understand that the shots fired at his section were hasty and not part of a deliberate ambush. Nonetheless, the shots had been fired in the direction of his men and other members of the platoon. The ROE permitted him and his men to return fire. They did so in a disciplined manner. Had he ordered his men to return large volumes of fire and maintain their barrage, he would most likely have drawn an equally strong and aggressive response from Indonesian troops moving towards the sound of firing to assist their comrades.

Against the odds

On 16 October, an Australian patrol was involved in a firefight with a particularly vicious militia group known to operate in the Aidabasalala area. Over twenty militiamen stumbled across the six-man Australian Special Forces reconnaissance patrol and opened fire immediately in a flurry of inaccurate shots. This initial engagement was followed by a series of firefights near the village of Aidabasalala. The Australians' accurate and measured return of fire killed and wounded several militiamen. The initial attacking force withdrew. This patrol's ordeal was not over, however. The sound of the shooting attracted more militiamen who also rushed in immediately. After an intense exchange of fire, this group withdrew with more dead and wounded before attacking again. After over two hours of attack and counterattack, INTERFET helicopters flew in and picked up the patrol, covered by their comrades from an immediate reaction force.

The Australians had been unlucky to have been drawn into a contest with a large group. Had they not survived and made their escape, or had members of the patrol been killed and others captured, the militia would have scored a significant victory against INTERFET in general, and the lauded Australian Special Forces in particular. The numbers killed and captured would have been small. In military terms, this setback would not have constituted a significant tactical defeat. In terms of the information dimension of modern military campaigns, the media would have made this tactical setback a major event that would have been reported around the world and throughout Australia's near region. Any captured Australians would have become part of an ongoing saga of media speculation and constituted significant leverage for the militia in any future negotiations. Efforts to recover captured Australians could have increased tensions along the border between Australian and Indonesian forces. The publicity generated by this setback could have encouraged other militia groups to attack INTERFET troops. By this time,

BRIG Evans had deployed forces along the entire length of the border, many of which were relatively isolated small groups. Emboldened by a victory at Aidabasalala, militia groups may have escalated their activities, conducting low risk hit-and-run attacks against these groups or on INTERFET logistic areas and resupply convoys moving to and from Dili.

This initially unlucky patrol had turned a potential media nightmare into an action that enhanced INTERFET's reputation for decisive and disciplined response when attacked. The patrol commander would later receive a medal for conspicuous bravery.

Long-range contest

On 20 October, MAJ David Rose and his rifle Coy from 3RAR responded to reports of militia wearing dark camouflage uniforms crossing the border to extort and steal from local villagers. He deployed his Coy into the area of the village of Beluluk Leten located 1500 metres from the border. A group of 'darkly clothed' militia had fired on patrolling observation helicopters the day before. Rose anticipated that this group would cross the border again and, if helicopters flew past them on patrol, they would open fire again. This time Rose and his men would ensure that an appropriate response greeted militia gunmen if they made the mistake of opening fire on INTERFET helicopters flying in East Timor airspace. Rose's troops were in position before dawn. Two Australian light observation helicopters flew over the village just after dawn as part of a normal border patrol.

About thirty armed militiamen spread in a line in East Timor territory paralleling the border fired at them. Rose's men could now engage them and did so from several hundred metres away. The distance was a challenge. Returning fire was soon further complicated by the sudden appearance of women and children among the darkly-clad militia gunmen. The Australians stopped firing as soon as they saw the women and children. The militia took this opportunity to increase their rate of fire at the Australians. Fortunately, their accuracy also suffered as a result of the distance.

Rose brought up a pair of snipers to engage the militia firing at his men. Once they were in position and had selected their targets, Rose gave them permission to shoot. Both missed their targets, but the near misses put the militia to flight. The contest was over.

Rose discovered later that the militia had taken several mothers and their children from a school on the other side of the border and forced them to accompany the gunmen into East Timor. Though impossible to prove conclusively, the militia may have been inviting an Australian response to cause casualties amongst these women and their children. This would have handed them a propaganda victory among displaced East Timorese in West Timor and further afield. The militia had been spreading stories for some time that INTERFET troops were sexually assaulting and killing women and girls in East Timor as well as randomly killing and brutalising other East Timorese civilians.

The cool actions of MAJ Rose and members of his Coy avoided a media nightmare. Had they killed or wounded any women or children that morning in their eagerness to retaliate, INTERFET's reputation as a responsible and humane international force defending East Timorese from hostile groups would have been seriously diminished. The provocative action of the militia would have received less prominence than the casualties among women and children caused by a strong and aggressive return of fire.

Aftermath

GEN Cosgrove was satisfied with the outcomes of actions that occurred during the first half of October. His Special Forces reconnaissance group and 2 RAR soldiers had demonstrated at Suai on 6 October and at Motaain on 10 October respectively that INTERFET was a tolerant, disciplined force but, once engaged could respond aggressively and apply lethal force effectively. On 16 October the message had been reinforced when the Special Forces patrol inflicted casualties for no loss near Aidabasalala. MAJ Rose's contact on 20 October had further emphasised the point that INTERFET would respond to militia incursions. The East Timorese knew that INTERFET was prepared to use force to help them fight militia intimidation without incurring the 'collateral damage' of civilian casualties.

The last days of October 1999 passed without incident. The militia and their controllers appeared to have ended a period of observation and testing of INTERFET units on the border for the time being. Intelligence sources revealed that word had spread throughout the militia groups that the border area was a dangerous place. By the end of October INTERFET had once again defeated the militia as it had done in Dili during the first ten days following the force's arrival.

First Blood

The deployment of the 6 RAR Group to East Timor in April 2000 proceeded uneventfully. After a short period of time in a tented camp at the heliport in Dili, the companies conducted a relief in place on the East Timor–West Timor border with their counterparts from the 5/7 RAR Mechanised Group. The 6 RAR companies moved into their areas of operation over the period 22–25 April 2000. The CO, LTCOL Mick Moon, a veteran of operations in Somalia in 1993, was not confident that he was fully informed on hostile activity in the Australian area of operations. He decided to begin his operations, following the advice of his CO in Somalia, LTCOL David Hurley, by following the infantry 'golden rule': 'when in doubt, patrol'.

Having spent a few days occupying a covert observation post that monitored markets across from the Nunura Bridge, SGT Brian Morton's snipers were decidedly unhappy with their lot. They wanted to be allocated more challenging areas of operations such as monitoring likely militia infiltration routes. Morton asked MAJ Ron Bossink, the patrol master, for tasks in the vicinity of likely infiltration routes. Bossink identified a small area of operations (AO) on the border known as ABALONE that had not been reconnoitred since March. He tasked Morton to dispatch a pair of snipers to the area for several days to observe displaced persons' camps and an Indonesian platoon position on a similar ridgeline just across the border and report back.

On the morning of 10 May, CPL Steve Jerome and PTE Jamie Moore, accompanied by SGT Stephen Brown, set out for AO ABALONE. They were dropped off covertly close to a town named Badutmean, near the Balibo–Batugade Road. After a slow, methodical approach to the area and having taken several hours to select a 'hide' that provided clear observation of the Indonesian position, the Australians moved into another hide for the night. Next morning, they carefully occupied the hide they had identified the day before. The intention was to have one member of the team observing through binoculars, one covering the hide and one sleeping.

At 0900 on 11 May, about thirty minutes after settling in, a man with three dogs approached from the low ground up the slope from the direction of the village. The dogs ran forward barking, with the man following close behind. When the man caught up with his dogs, he noticed a small hole had been cut in the thick lantana. The dogs had stuck their heads in and were growling

at Jerome. The man went up and peered in. he was startled to see his dogs snarling at a man in camouflage uniform pointing a 9-mm pistol at their faces. The man saw Jerome and raised his machete instinctively. The pistol swung round instantly. He was now staring down a pistol barrel at Jerome's blackened face and into a pair of piercing blue eyes. He turned on his heel and, sounding out 'ts...ts' for his dogs to follow him, he ran back down the slope in the direction of one of the villages. Jerome sent Brown and Moore down the slope to determine where the man had fled. After moving forward about fifty metres, they stopped and listened for some time. Hearing nothing, they returned to the hide.

Now discovered, Jerome had three options. He could seek approval from battalion headquarters to abort the mission, move to a pick-up point and return to Balibo. Alternatively, he could move and establish a hide in another position suitable for observing the Indonesian post and villages covertly. His final option was to stay put, knowing that his position was likely to have been communicated to the villagers. He assessed that given his mission was to observe the Indonesian position from inside East Timor, the fact that the villagers might know his location did not warrant abandoning the mission. He sent an incident report by radio that the hide had been compromised and advised that, for the time being, his team would stay in place.

About an hour later, despite the muffling effect of a steady drizzle that had been falling all morning, Steve Brown heard the sound of movement about fifteen metres away on his left flank. Whoever was approaching was doing so slowly and stealthily, having come up a very steep slope that was sheer in several places. This suggested that the approaching person had climbed an escarpment to move to the flank of the hide—a well thought-out covered approach to the Australian position. Brown turned the muzzle of his rifle slowly to the left as he adopted a kneeling position—he needed to be high enough to see through the thick foliage.

A few seconds later he noticed the stock and muzzle of a Mauser rifle and the upper body of a man coming towards him. Behind the man he could hear the movement of at least two more people. He gestured to Jerome and Moore, pointing to the location of the noises. He caught a glimpse of an arm moving in a manner suggesting a military field signal from the man closest to him. Both Jerome and Moore had heard the noises, and were observing the approaching figures. They all knew that they were being stalked. Brown pushed the safety catch of his rifle to 'fire'. The safety catch made a very faint click, not normally detected by the firer. In these heart-thumping circumstances, the click was almost thunderous. For a terrifying split second he thought the man and his companions must have heard the noise. They had not. The man continued slowly moving towards Brown, who could now see clearly that the man was wearing a red headband. He was now only five metres away.

Before Brown had a chance to challenge, he saw Brown and immediately raised his weapon to fire. Brown snapped off three two-to-three-round bursts at the man, who dropped from sight instantly. He heard rapid movement behind the man. Following his training, he then emptied his magazine in three-round bursts low at where the man had dropped. As he fired, Brown moved back to Moore's position. He took up a fire position beside Moore, who was behind a tree covering forward, and reloaded. There was only room for one person behind that particular tree. Brown fervently wished Moore had selected a bigger one so he could have moved behind the reassuring cover of thick wood. Unbeknown to Brown, Moore had fired five rounds just past Brown's head when the man had raised his weapon. Brown was concentrating on the accuracy of his fire and had failed to notice. Brown waited, certain that the man was lying either dead or seriously wounded down the steep slope off to the left flank of the hide. The training drills had worked perfectly. All three were alive, alert and in a reasonable position to handle any follow-up

action from their unexpected visitors. They were disconcerted now by the silence that followed the loud bursts of fire. There had been no return fire. Once Brown had moved beside Moore, there had been no further sound and no movement. Whoever had stalked them had left with the same quiet efficiency that they had used to move so close. Brown and Jerome concluded that their visitors' 'break contact drill' was very professional.

Once again Jerome had options. He could stay and wait for nightfall to pull out or he could take his chances and move the team to either a place to hide, or straight back to the road. For the moment, however, the wisest course of action was to wait for any further action. There could well be more armed men further back or in the vicinity of the three men they had contacted.

While they were stationary in a hide, anyone moving towards them was vulnerable. If they moved, and there were other assailants in the area, the Australians would be three foxes running from a pack of hounds. Jerome and his team were dressed in heavy patrol gear while their pursuers would be travelling light, carrying only their rifles and ammunition. More importantly, their pursuers were likely to know the area and its many tracks well. The odds were high that this local knowledge would give pursuers a competitive edge to cut the Australians off.

Jerome radioed his report of the incident. He advised once again that he had decided to remain in the hide, but recommended that a patrol be flown in to reinforce him, clear the area, and look for signs of the group that they had contacted. Mick Moon had also been considering Jerome's tactical options. Now discovered twice, there was little doubt that hostile groups knew roughly where they were from the sounds of their fire. Moon ordered a Kiowa light observation helicopter to fly to the contact site and report on anyone moving in the area. It arrived an hour and a half later—a disappointingly slow response. The pilot reported that a large crowd of villagers with Indonesian soldiers among them had gathered at the foot of the long spur line on the West Timor side of the border that ran up into East Timor to the hide. Fernandez also reported that they were looking up in the direction of the hide. She was unable to see anything moving near the hide because of the thick *lantana* covering the area.

Moon decided to reinforce Jerome rather than ordering him to patrol out. Moon was also mindful that one person had probably been shot. There would have to be an investigation. Authorities in West Timor would use the contact to criticise the behaviour of the Australian troops on the border. He needed comprehensive evidence of what had happened. He directed Jerome to remain in the hide and ordered a specialist immediate response team to be dispatched with cameras and other equipment to gather the evidence required to establish the facts.

Three hours later, the specialists arrived after an exhausting patrol to the hide through thick vegetation. They secured the area, established their communication links and began to photograph the area and collect evidence. They found quantities of blood and strips of flesh and muscle sinew that suggested that at least one person had received very serious gunshot wounds at close range. There was also another light blood trail leading away suggesting someone else had been hit. Unfortunately, the drizzle that had been falling steadily during the morning had saturated the area so that other evidence, such as footprints, had been washed away. Because the slope fell away to a cliff face further down, it was possible that the seriously wounded person had fallen down and over the cliff to the creek line below.

As the specialists were completing their work, the Australians heard two voices calling out 'Friendly! Friendly!' in strong Asian accents. Two Malaysian UN military observers were approaching. Initially, the Australians decided to remain concealed and let them walk by. They

radioed Moon who decided that he would prefer that Jerome, Brown and Moore spoke to him before they spoke with UN observers. Once Jerome, Brown and Moore had moved to the road, the specialists contacted the two observers and spoke to them for some time. By the time the trio arrived back at Balibo five hours had elapsed since the contact. They were exhausted, relieved, and jokingly asked for a few beers to help them relax after their tense experience. Mick Moon met them with the RSM, WO1 Dave Ashley, and SGT Brian Morton. He congratulated them and confirmed that they had performed well.

As expected, the headquarters of the peacekeeping force (HQ PkF) in Dili directed that a comprehensive investigation be conducted into the contact. A man named Manuel Martinez had walked into one of the villages with fragmentation wounds to the stomach and upper right shoulder area. The Indonesian Army issued a statement that Martinez had been ambushed and shot without warning by 'blond-haired, blue-eyed Australians'. Apparently, whoever was coaching Martinez to tell his story had picked up on what the man with the three dogs had reported after his surprise encounter with Jerome prior to the contact. Jerome did have blond hair and blue eyes. Stephen Brown who had fired the shots that may have caused Martinez's injuries was by his own self-description 'a big, black Maori boy' with a shaved head and dark brown eyes. It was likely that Martinez had been the second or third man in the group that had stalked the hide. His injuries were caused by fragments of metal and wood resulting from the impact of Brown's rounds on the trees around him. The Australians had drawn first blood in a chance contact with two or three inquisitive individuals who had unwisely decided to cross into East Timor and stalk Jerome's three-man observation post.

The subsequent UN investigation of the contact once again focused the Australians on the possible consequences of contravening the ROE. The ROE already allowed armed groups to take the initiative in any confrontation with the Australians. Brown had obeyed the ROE when he waited for the man who was stalking him to raise his weapon to fire. The fact that the stalker was wearing a red bandanna suggested that he was a member of a militia group. Fortunately, Brown had seen him first and thus had time to take aim and fire. The subsequent UN investigative response demonstrated that, during UN peace support operations, these split-second decisions taken when emotions were high, visibility low and danger close, would always be subject to forensic scrutiny over days and weeks.

The Indonesian response also demonstrated that every time an Australian pulled the trigger in East Timor a negative story would emerge. LTCOL Moon had prudently ensured that he would be armed with photographic evidence and the statements of the Australians involved if the media believed and magnified any propaganda. He had ample means to quickly refute any accusations. Information operations, both proactive and reactive, form an important dimension of modern peace support operations.

The actions of SGT Brown, CPL Jerome and PTE Moore were disciplined and legal. Indeed, it could be argued that, even given the reactive UN ROE, they could have opened fire on the armed men stalking their position on the basis of the hostile intent evident in their manner of movement and their arrival once the hide had been compromised. Had Brown, Jerome or Moore panicked and shot the man with the dogs or blazed away at those stalking them, leaving numerous shell casings as evidence of the application of disproportionate force, the reputation of the newly arrived 6 RAR Group could have been substantially tarnished. This would have handed hostile groups in West Timor an early propaganda victory and blighted the 6 RAR Group's tour of duty in East Timor with the media, whose representatives may not have given the Australians the benefit of the doubt or time to present evidence in future firefights.

Second Blood

LTCOL Mick Moon's decision to order high tempo patrolling soon paid handsome dividends. By the first week in May, patrols began discovering evidence that militia groups had been reconnoitering across the border. Within two weeks, a pattern began to emerge. Australian patrols discovered small campsites in thick lantana along infiltration routes. Entrances and exits to these sites were cut in a tunnel-like fashion through foliage. They were carefully sited and well hidden. Small, concealed fires had been used for cooking and there were only a few noodle packets, clove cigarette butts and some betel nut spit stains to identify who had been using the sites. Experienced reconnaissance personnel and snipers from 6 RAR concluded that the men using these camps displayed an excellent knowledge of fieldcraft. Tellingly, the campsites were not old enough to be those of the East Timorese FALINTIL independence guerrillas, or the work of hunters or cattle rustlers. Some campsites, known in Australian military parlance as 'lying-up places', were so recent that boot prints could be identified. At least some members of what appeared to be four to six-man groups who had used this network of campsites had been wearing Indonesian military pattern boots.

Moon and his staff made two deductions from this evidence. The first was that a hit-and-run attack might occur against one of the junction point positions at night, especially at Memo or at the Nunura Bridge. The second was that the four-night period of the full moon in late May might enable infiltrators to use the moonlight to guide themselves into position for such an attack. As a consequence, Coy commanders alerted platoons manning the junction points to be especially vigilant during this period.

On the evening of 28 May, MAJ Carl Webb was feeling particularly unhappy with the location of a Reconnaissance Platoon section forward of the Nunura Bridge near Junction Point Bravo. In his opinion, CPL Daniel Morgan's patrol and his ANTRAS thermal imager were too far forward on the riverbank without sufficient cover. He assessed that the ANTRAS could operate just as effectively from the tower in LT Matt Ingram's platoon position at the southern end of the Nunura Bridge. At about 2230 Morgan, PTE David McLennan (the platoon signaller) and PTE Sean Fitton occupied this tower bunker on piquet. Looking through the ANTRAS, Morgan observed several figures, about a hundred metres away, slowly and stealthily approaching the bridge area. They appeared to be carrying long-barrelled weapons.

Within a few minutes of Morgan's discovery Matt Ingram had been woken and the remainder of the platoon stood to in their defensive positions wearing their Ninnox night vision equipment with their weapons at the ready. Ingram had gone forward to the tower, but Morgan had told him to position himself at the foot of the tower because he would be silhouetted if he climbed up. He was close enough, however, to whisper to Ingram that there were four men carrying rifles approaching the bridge, closing to a range of about seventy metres. The approaching men stopped briefly to confer and continued to creep forward.

This information was radioed to Webb's Coy headquarters at Tonabibi, about two kilometres away. Webb alerted LT Rob Bailey's quick reaction force. Bailey quietly mounted half his platoon into two APCs and gave orders to his troops. They were to drive down the road towards the Nunura Bridge, dismount short of the bridge and sweep down in front of the bridge in order to outflank and apprehend the four men approaching Ingram's position. By this time each member of Ingram's platoon had identified all four infiltrators using their Ninnox night vision goggles. They watched their assailants carefully, looking down their sights along their NADS laser beams at each individual. Thus far, none of the creeping men had demonstrated hostile

intentions towards the platoon. Legal officers had lectured the 6 RAR platoons time and again on situations such as this. The diggers knew only too well that they could not engage anyone, especially at night, unless it was clear that they were behaving with hostile intent. Unfortunately, Ingram was down beside the tower and could not see what was going on. He was relying on Morgan to keep him informed of the movements of each of the infiltrators and to open fire if necessary. Morgan was closely monitoring the movements of the infiltrators as they crossed into East Timor but assessed that they were still too far away from the bridge for a verbal challenge.

When the infiltrators reached the foot of the bridge a few minutes later, they remained unchallenged but continued to be keenly observed. One of the men moved quickly behind the bridge footings and crept up towards the tower unobserved. Suddenly, Fitton felt something pass through the air a few centimetres from his head and travel behind him. Before he realised what had happened, there was a loud explosion behind the tower. Platoon members were stunned momentarily. This gave the four infiltrators time to turn and run away from the bridge back across the riverbed into West Timor. Morgan realised that one of the infiltrators had thrown a grenade. He took aim and pulled his trigger only to curse in frustration as his rifle had a stoppage. It was now too late for the remainder of the platoon to fire. The ROE did not permit them to fire at persons running away, even if they had committed a hostile act.

The Korean-made grenade had travelled through the front of the bunker on top of the tower between the roof and the wall of sandbags and exploded about two paces in front of LCPL Wayne Harwood's machine-gun position. Though some shrapnel had gone into his arm and other pieces were lodged in his chin and neck, Harwood was not seriously wounded. The explosion and the sight of blood, however, had shocked him and his mates. By the time the grenade exploded, Bailey and his quick reaction force were already on their way. They were too late to apprehend the infiltrators, but they were able to quickly evacuate Harwood for further treatment. Harwood was unlucky to have been wounded, but fortunate in the wounds he had received. Had the fragments embedded in his chin and neck impacted a few centimetres higher on his face, or had the grenade exploded a metre closer to him, his wounds would have been much more serious and he might have lost the sight in one or both eyes.

This incident at Nunura was first blood to the militia, and second blood in a reconnaissance contest that had now escalated to 'hit and run' attack. Evidence discovered later confirmed that hostile groups had reconnoitered several Australian positions with the intention of conducting this type of attack. The attack at the Nunura Bridge was the first and it had been successful.

Unfortunately, due to a combination of inexperience and strict adherence to ROE, the attack had not been foiled, despite the Australians' tactical advantage of night vision allowing clear observation of their assailants. Morgan and Ingram had made the right call at the time. There had been nothing in their briefings about infiltrators having previously thrown grenades against PkF positions. Approaching a position by night, even to reconnoitre, was not sufficient hostile intent to warrant opening fire. Border operations at this time were intended to deter attacks and force infiltrators back to West Timor, rather than attempt to kill them on sight. With hindsight, a verbal challenge might have proven useful.

While the grenade attack at the Nunura Bridge had drawn blood, it had also reaped several benefits. Many members of the 6 RAR Group recalled that they had been in 'field exercise mode', wondering whether there was anyone in their area of operations with hostile intent towards them. The contact two weeks before with Brown, Jerome and Moore had alerted them to the presence of hostile intent and had inflicted first blood. When Harwood was wounded,

second blood had been drawn, and they realised more deeply and emotionally that their time in East Timor would be unlike any exercise. Now, for the first time, they appreciated that there were hostile groups intent on killing Australians and that one of these groups had succeeded in wounding a comrade. They had entered the contest.

The incident at Nunura caused Moon and his commanders to reassess the threat. Now that their opponents had shown their hand, Moon ordered that each static position occupied by Australian troops was to be hardened. Over the next few days the Australians constructed more sandbag defences and encircled bunkers in wire mesh to deter grenade throwers and protect the occupants against thrown grenades. Those occupying bunkers were ordered to wear flak jackets and helmets. In effect, the attack at the Nunura Bridge forced the Australians to sharpen up. They now became more alert to the dangers of operations and every sentry became more attentive to the behaviour of those approaching their positions or patrols.

Moon also applied more pressure to the 6 RAR Group by increasing the tempo of offensive operations, particularly at night. Patrols moved out wearing night vision goggles in an attempt to detect militia groups infiltrating across the border. He increased night surveillance. Mindful that the militia would use the cover of darkness to move and possibly attack their positions, Moon began ordering 'stand to' periods between 2300 and 0200. The 6 RAR Group became more vigilant, followed up on information aggressively and waited for the infiltrators' next move.

Kill or be Killed

CPL David Hawkins' section arrived at Aidabasalala to occupy a fortified house in the village on 21 June. Hawkins was a veteran of peace support operations in both Somalia and Rwanda. He and his second-in-command, LCPL John Stapleton, were regulars. The remainder of the section were reservists on full-time duty. One was a Telstra technician, one was an executive at General Motors, another worked for the McDonald's food chain and the others were university students. From the beginning Hawkins was 'very surprised' to note the comfortable camaraderie of the reservists, and the ease with which they approached him and Stapleton. He had driven them hard during training, they had bonded well and Hawkins was pleased with the results.

Aidabasalala is a line of houses and huts running about two kilometres either side of an unsealed road along the northern edge of the Nunura River valley. The area had been home to the halilintar militia group which, while supported by locals in Aidabasalala, had terrorised the local population in surrounding areas. Only a few dwellings had been destroyed in Aidabasalala but there had been devastation elsewhere. Moon had initially occupied the village with a platoon in order to deter the return of the Halilintar militia group or to capture them if they ventured back. By mid-June there was no sign of them returning home from West Timor. Moon scaled down the Australian presence in the area from a platoon to a section.

The house that Hawkins' section occupied was in the centre of the village. The building itself had old concertina wire around it which was starting to fall down. Hawkins and his men found six hundred sandbags and more concertina wire that had been left for them to fortify the house. The people in Aidabasalala were not as supportive of INTERFET as those in other locations in East Timor, and Hawkins thought they might pose a threat. The attack on Ingram's platoon at the Nunura Bridge provided ample evidence that hostile groups were capable of throwing grenades at Australian positions. Hawkins' position was isolated and required extra protection, particularly at night. The Australians began to work immediately. Hawkins later recalled:

The guys and I were working fairly hard from first up in the morning. We worked right through for a couple of days and on the twenty-first we worked straight through lunch ... just ... a 10–15min break to go and have a feed ... then get back into it. We were pretty well stuffed; I said jokingly, ‘If the militia are coming, they’re coming down through the back, through the vegetation.

Earlier in the day LCPL Greg Murty, a crew commander from an attached APC section who had been in Aidabasalala for several weeks, noticed three smiling men, neatly dressed and friendly, moving around the village showing an interest in the area around the Australian position. The East Timorese would normally pass the time in the shade watching the Australians work. The men looked out of place. He did not report their activities to Hawkins and he did not have the language skills to ask villagers about them. Hawkins and his men noticed that, in contrast to the rest of Timor, the villagers in Aidabasalala did not go out of their way to welcome them.

Hawkins and his men worked hard that day, filling numerous sandbags to put into a bunker at the rear of the house. They took the soil from the fighting bays and grenade trenches they had also dug. By 1800 the blokes were absolutely buggered having worked flat out all day. As night fell, the Australians moved into their night routine. Classic model ground and thermal sensors were put out and Hawkins posted the first two sentries. The remainder of the section settled in for the night, each knowing that his sleep would be interrupted by a two-hour period on sentry duty.

LCPL Murty was in the forward weapon pit on sentry duty at midnight with PTE Dixon. He was slightly perplexed as there were no sounds in the village. No dogs and no people. A few minutes before he was supposed to be relieved from his watch, one of the Classic ground sensors around the back of the house went off. Unbeknown to Murty and Dixon, sensors had already gone off several times earlier that night. The same had happened the night before. The Australians assessed that small foraging animals were triggering the sensors. This time Dixon went to investigate the back area of the house, wearing his night vision goggles. He examined the vegetation out the back of the house closely through his goggles, but saw nothing. When he returned to the sentry position at the front of the house he told Murty that he had seen nothing. Murty said he was annoyed because he should have been back on his stretcher and asleep by now. The next man to relieve him had not yet arrived, having been woken only five minutes before. Now that Dixon was back, he would give him another minute or so, and then go into the house and stir him again.

Paulo Gonclaves, a prominent Halilintar militia leader and three of his men, were positioned undetected in the thick vegetation at the back of the house. Another group of five militiamen was off to the side of the house, able to look into the front yard. Six men, including Gonclaves, were poised to throw K-75 Korean-made hand grenades. The plan appeared to be to kill the Australians in three phases. Phase 1 involved throwing two grenades through the rear window of the house to cause casualties and rouse the Australians from their sleep. Phase 2 would see the militiamen waiting until Hawkins and his men emerged through the front door when they would throw the remaining grenades among them. In Phase 3 the militiamen would open fire from the rear through the window and also across the front of the house into the yard creating a crossfire to finish the Australians off. This was an excellent plan. But it would require discipline and timing to execute. Gonclaves had selected the full moon cycle for his attack. The extra moonlight gave his men the best opportunity to throw grenades and fire their rifles accurately. Getting everyone into position without being discovered by the sentries after setting off the Classic sensors was a feat in itself.

Gonclaves had good reason to hate Australians. He had controlled the Aidabasalala village and local area prior to the conduct of the ballot on 30 August the year before. He was appalled at the result. Like other militia leaders, he had taken revenge on pro-independence supporters and their property. He had allegedly burned down houses and terrorised pro-independence supporters in the villages around Aidabasalala and was reported to have killed a number of people. On 16 October he and a group of his men had encountered a patrol of Australians from INTERFET's response force. The patrol commander and his four companions had been outnumbered and Gonclaves and his men had attacked the patrol three times. Each time the militiamen attacked, however, the Australians had returned accurate fire, killing several militiamen and wounding others during the rapid, deadly exchanges. Gonclaves himself was shot and wounded and finally called off the attack. Among the other allegations against Gonclaves was the report that he had killed a family of seven—father, mother and five children—before fleeing to West Timor once 2 RAR arrived on the border. Unlike most of the other houses in the village, Gonclaves' house was made of grey, rendered brick. It was abandoned but intact. No one appeared to have the courage to burn it down in retaliation for the houses Gonclaves had allegedly burned down and the people he had allegedly killed. In the front yard, laid out in one row, each covered in stones, were seven graves. The villagers had buried the family of seven in Gonclaves' front yard to remind him of his crime should he ever return.

On 21 June, Paulo Gonclaves not only returned, but also told villagers that he was going to kill the Australians to avenge the deaths and wounding of his men on 16 October. The villagers believed him. They had gathered at the southern end of the village, keeping their children and dogs quiet and awaiting the outcome of Gonclaves' attack eight hundred metres away.

Dixon returned to the sentry post at the front of the house a few minutes after midnight, just as Gonclaves threw his grenade, aimed so that it would crash through the glass and explode inside among the sleeping Australians. His throw fell short. The grenade rolled towards a bench in front of the window and came to rest less than a metre away. It exploded a few seconds later, shattering the glass, and peppering the bench and outside wall with fragments. Inside it was bedlam. The Australians were inside mosquito domes. Hawkins was naked and most of his men were either naked, or wearing shorts or underpants. Fortunately, they were all lying down. The shattering glass and grenade fragments that speared through the rear window were too high to wound them. Chunks of cement rendering and brick propelled off the inside wall, showered their mosquito domes and covered the floor. There was dust and confusion. One question reverberated around the house, 'What the fuck is going on?!'

The scramble to get dressed and get boots on saved lives. Gonclaves' men did not wait for the Australians to come out of the house to hurl their grenades. The flanking group threw four grenades into the front yard within a few seconds of the first two exploding outside the window at the back and on the roof. LCPL Murty and PTE Dixon were in the sentry bunker at the front of the house. All they could do was stay low and shelter behind the sandbags, hoping that a grenade would not arc into their pit.

Inside the house Hawkins and his men readied themselves to burst out through the door to their sandbagged fighting bays in the yard. After the sixth grenade had exploded there was a pause. Hawkins was about to order his men out when Gonclaves' men began raking the house from the rear with semi-automatic fire. Rounds crashed through the remaining glass in the window and hit the opposite wall near where the Australians were poised in a huddle to break out. Once again they were low enough to avoid being hit. After the first group opened up from the rear, the second group joined in and fired rapidly into the yard from the side, along the front of the

house. Once again the second group had acted prematurely. They had not waited until the group at the rear had flushed out the Australians, channelling them into Gonclaves' chosen killing ground in the front yard. The attack ended as suddenly as it had begun. Gonclaves' men emptied their magazines in a torrent of fire that hosed down the building and the yard, and then quickly withdrew. They had failed. Hawkins recalls:

...if we had have pushed out any quicker, there's a good chance that they could have hit us from the flank and done a lot of damage. I don't think they had the discipline or nerve to stick around once the first group fired, the second group fired and all they were thinking about was getting out. I think the idea was to get as many casualties as they could, and just disappear.

Hawkins waited for a minute or so and yelled, 'Get out!' he and Stapleton went out first to show the way and took up fire positions, propped on one knee, facing out. They directed the others to positions so they could look out on all the approaches to the house—front and back. The Australians scanned back and forward looking through their night vision goggles. Everything was quiet. Their laser target designators sent beams from their Steyr rifles through the grenade smoke, but they did not find any targets. It was almost impossible to see through the smoke. Suddenly four figures crossed the road a hundred metres in front of where PTE Lance Moonie was aiming. He had a good sight picture assisted by moonlight. He held his fire, undecided whether the figures were armed or not, hesitating as they were not demonstrating hostile intentions towards him or the section. It was a good call. They were four villagers who had run down from where the others were huddled to see what had happened to Hawkins and his men. They reconsidered and crossed over the road to return to where the other villagers were hiding.

Hawkins consolidated his section around the house facing out, sent back a contact report and spoke with MAJ John McCaffery and his platoon commander, LT Simon Mouatt, over the radio. he knew his section had been very lucky. LCPL Murty was probably one of the luckiest. When the four grenades had landed in the front yard many fragments had gone through the front door opening. Murty's mosquito dome and stretcher was located along the far wall opposite the door. It had been shredded with grenade fragments. Had he been relieved from sentry duty on time at midnight and gone straight to bed as he had intended to do, he would have been dead or seriously wounded. Murty's driver, Trooper Scott, sleeping near Murty's vacated stretcher, was also lucky. That afternoon, Hawkins had supervised the erection of a mesh screen over the doorway. One grenade, thrown through the front door, had hit the screen and rolled back into the yard. Had it gone through the door or landed in the doorway, the fragments would have lacerated Scott, possibly seriously wounding him.

In the aftermath of the attack on Aidabasalala, Hawkins and his men became unsettled. None of them slept well for some time after the attack, despite further fortification of the house. All were edgy and irritable, with counseling from army psychologists appearing to have little effect. What sustained them as a group and helped each individual through these tough times was the mateship forged during training and the initial weeks on the border, as well as the shared experience of the shock of Gonclaves' midnight visit. Hawkins knew that the members of his section were now far more alert and vigilant than they had been previously.

The attack on Hawkins and his men had the hallmarks of a professional military operation. It was probably designed to achieve a significant victory in the information war as well as an act of vengeance for the casualties that the Australian Special Forces patrol had inflicted on the Halilintar militia in October 1999. The Australian public, used to deployed Australian forces

remaining casualty free, would have been shocked at ten casualties in one action and the militia habit of mutilating bodies. The killing and wounding of ten Australians would have been the top news story for some time. Any captured Australians would have become a major media saga and propaganda coup. Worldwide coverage of a tactical defeat that resulted in the parading of American bodies in Mogadishu in 1993 had prompted President Bill Clinton to withdraw American troops, leaving the Somali people as prey for several warlords and their barbaric militia armies. After a tactical defeat in Aidabasalala that may have been followed by a grisly aftermath, media commentators and talk-back radio hosts in Australia would have fuelled public debate about the merits of Australia's commitment to East Timor. Australian protest groups may have emerged calling for an Australian withdrawal.

The investigation into the attack may have called into question why Blackhawk helicopters had been withdrawn to support the Olympic Games in Sydney, and had not remained in East Timor to provide aero-medical evacuation and air mobile reinforcement capabilities in support of Australian troops on the border. Had there been casualties that night, they would have waited in the pitch black for medical treatment and evacuation by road. The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) peacekeeping force did not have helicopters that could fly at night to evacuate casualties. Even if UNTAET had possessed such a capability, there was some doubt whether UN contractors or pilots assigned to UNTAET would have flown into Aidabasalala had they known that heavy casualties had been inflicted by an unknown group that could still be in the area waiting for helicopters to arrive. The chances of Australian Blackhawk pilots flying in to help their wounded compatriots would have been much greater.

In Parliament, the Opposition would have applied significant political pressure to the Government—particularly the Minister for Defence—for withdrawing the Blackhawks. ADM Barrie visited Aidabasalala in person a few days after the attack. He returned to Australia and gave the Prime Minister and Minister for Defence a first-hand report. He received approval to order the immediate return of the Blackhawks. A successful attack at Aidabasalala would have been a significant military setback for the UNTAET peacekeeping force. Militia groups were infiltrating across the border into the central region near Dili. Portuguese troops were on full alert after sightings of armed militia groups. The slaughter of Hawkins and his men would have emboldened those controlling the militia in West Timor to look for further opportunities to conduct similar hit-and-run assaults on isolated UN positions.

For the Australians, the contest had changed. Militia groups wanted to kill them in premeditated, well planned attacks. The Aidabasalala attack had failed in its execution, but had also demonstrated that the militia had the capacity for innovative tactical planning. Paulo Gonclaves and his men were still at large. He would have learned enough from the Aidabasalala attack to thoroughly rehearse and improve coordination for future attacks. There was no doubt that this unsuccessful attack had a galvanising effect on the 6 RAR Group. It remained to be seen, however, how the well trained, determined, but inexperienced infantrymen of the 6 RAR Group would fare in an old-fashioned armed contest of 'kill or be killed'.

Mountain Fights

By the end of July the Australians headed towards the jungled slopes of Mount Leolaco due to reported sightings of armed groups. Mount Leolaco, rising to just under 2000 metres in height, sits a few kilometres north-east of Maliana and is around two and a half kilometres in length, running north-south. This feature was an ideal guerrilla base and infiltration route into the rich rice flood plains of East Timor stretching up the Nunura River valley. Its steep slopes are covered

in thick lantana and strewn with large boulders. The mountain summit holds fresh water, thick primary forest and numerous caves. During the Indonesian occupation, lightly armed FALINTIL guerrilla forces had hidden successfully on Mount Leolaco, inflicting heavy casualties on the Indonesian forces deployed to hunt them down.

In the hot mid-afternoon of 1 August 2000, LT Michael Humphreys' 1 Platoon was led by locals, who had reported seeing three armed men dressed in Indonesian Army camouflage uniforms, to the site of a number of fresh Indonesian Army boot prints. Humphreys followed these boot prints until last light, but was reluctant to track an armed group at night and returned instead to the Coy patrol base. Overnight Mick Moon assigned MAJ David Thomae a group of trackers from Reconnaissance Platoon and another specialist group. He directed him to position blocking forces ahead of the infiltrators and follow their tracks using his assigned specialists.

Next morning Thomae delivered his orders, placing half of LT Michael Humphreys' platoon, a Reconnaissance Platoon tracker group and a specialist patrol under the command of a troop commander. This group quickly picked up the tracks of the infiltrators and began an arduous climb towards the cliffs of Mount Leolaco. After several hours of slowly closing on their quarry, the Australians lost the tracks in rocky ground in a creek bed. They suspected that the group had broken track and headed off in a different direction. Having lost their quarry for the time being, the troop commander decided to halt, going into all-round defence near a creek bed for lunch.

LCPL Brad Wilkins was manning his section's machine-gun when five men dressed in Indonesian Army camouflage clothing and armed with SKS rifles moved down from higher ground, one behind the other in tactical formation. They were alert, watchful and had plenty of cover from large boulders in the creek bed and thick vegetation either side. If they continued moving down the creek bed in this manner, they would soon be in the platoon position and able to engage the diggers as they ate their lunch. Wilkins had a decision to make. He waited until the group was twenty metres away before he opened up with a short burst at the lead man.

Wilkins hit him: one of his rounds went through the stock of the infiltrator's rifle that he was holding across his body and ricocheted into his stomach, while another drilled into his upper leg. He fell and crawled away while his companions, shocked by Wilkins' sudden burst, took cover and returned fire. The other Australians in the vicinity quickly joined Wilkins in a brisk exchange of shots. Specialist troopers fired a volley of 40-mm rocket propelled grenades amongst the return fire and another infiltrator was wounded, a gunshot wound in his neck and multiple 40mm grenade fragments lacerating his body. He dragged himself away while his companions returned fire.

Michael Humphreys gathered his men and pushed forward twenty metres to consolidate a firing line closer to the infiltrators. Wilkins joined them, with his gunner a few seconds behind. The infiltrators ceased firing, as did the Australians, following the UN ROE that authorized them to return fire only in self-defence. Wilkins' initial burst had been intended to protect his mates from being surprised by armed men patrolling in a military manner. Taking advantage of the pause in Australian fire, an infiltrator threw a grenade. It exploded three metres further up the creek line from the Australian firing line, sending mud and debris flying in all directions. In reply, the Australians opened up again and grenadiers fired further volleys of 40-mm grenades.

It was decision-time. The infiltrators were starting to pull back using fire and movement through the boulders. he quickly considered his two primary options. The Australian troop commander could follow up the infiltrators by directing his men to assault up the creek line or, alternatively,

manoeuvre troops off to a flank and try to cut the infiltrators off with a flank assault. While he moved around the flank with his men, Wilkins' section and the remainder of Humphreys' half platoon, who were already engaging the infiltrators, could be used to keep them pinned down.

Fearing that a frontal assault would be too risky because his opponents were occupying higher ground and firing from good cover, the troop commander decided to outflank them with Ingram's men and his specialist patrol. He had to move quickly as the infiltrators were returning fire while they withdrew up the creek line to higher ground. The difficulty in this choice involved moving into position through the thick vegetation along the sides of the creek bed.

After several minutes struggling through thick vegetation, the troop commander realised that his assault group was taking too long to move into position. The infiltrators were slipping away. Humphreys yelled out that he wanted to sweep forward because the infiltrators were escaping. Realising that he was getting nowhere, the troop commander gave permission for Humphreys to push up the creek line. By this time the infiltrators were out of sight. His men found the body of the man who had sustained the gunshot wound to his neck and lacerations from a 40-mm grenade. There was no trace of the man Wilkins had shot.

The troop commander cancelled his flanking assault and ordered his group to consolidate in an all-round defence near where the body lay. He then sent out patrols for several exhausting hours to comb the area for signs of their opponents including abandoned equipment and tracks. During a sweep back down the steep creek line, Humphreys' men found the body of the man Wilkins had wounded. He had crawled over two hundred metres up the creek line to a sniping position. His ammunition was laid out in front of him to allow him to reload quickly. He was well positioned to cover the front of the former Australian firing line. Had the troop commander decided to assault through Humphreys' position directly at the gunman's withdrawing companions, he could have picked the Australians off from the right flank. Instead, before Humphreys had pushed his men up the creek line, the gunman had bled to death, frozen in his deadly firing position. The Australians were amazed that both wounded infiltrators had been able to crawl so far in thick vegetation and over steep, difficult terrain.

For some of those who had been involved in the contact, jubilation was soon followed by mixed feelings. Many had felt exhilarated and excited during the firefight and subsequent pursuit of the withdrawing infiltrators. Once contact was broken and they settled down, the mood changed. Every man came to look at the bodies. Humphreys noticed that some did so reluctantly and others became subdued after seeing them. Several Australians were shocked and experienced a rush of both positive and negative emotions. They felt satisfaction that two infiltrators had been killed and a sense of pride that they had participated in a successful firefight, but also experienced feelings of remorse for having killed fellow human beings.

Many Australians felt that the contact on 2 August established the credentials of the battalion following the militia attacks at Nunura Bridge and Aidabasalala. The battalion had achieved the fundamental objective of the infantry, 'to close with and kill the enemy'. Many felt that they had reached a turning point, providing them both the initiative and the confidence to retain it.

The tactic of assigning trackers to half platoon patrols had paid off. Smaller groups would not have had the firepower to tackle groups of infiltrators and out manoeuvre them. The focus of Australian operations now moved to Mount Leolaco. The contact on 2 August had occurred four kilometres west and the infiltrators had withdrawn up the mountain. It was now time to track them up to the top and engage them in an old-fashioned infantry contest.

Operations on top of Mount Leolaco

Moon assigned another platoon from MAJ Carl Webb's C Coy, the remainder of Reconnaissance Platoon and more specialist trackers to MAJ David Thomae and told him to patrol infiltration routes, search caves and comb the Mount Leolaco area. For his part, Thomae positioned half platoon blocking positions along the western and eastern approaches to the mountain. Concurrently, he sent combined reconnaissance and sniper patrols and specialist patrols with East Timorese guides onto the mountain in pursuit of the remainder of the group that had been contacted on 2 August and to find and apprehend any other infiltrators in the area. For the next four days the Australians played a game of cat and mouse with groups of infiltrators. Trackers on Mount Leolaco listened to the eerie sounds of their quarry signalling to one another by firing shots and slapping trees with the flat side of their machetes. The Australians hoped they would not share the same fate as many of their Indonesian predecessors who had hunted FALINTIL guerrillas in the same area. The trick was to remain stationary and wait for infiltrators, rather than walking in on them while they were waiting and alert. The Australians employed several tactical techniques, including moving for a period and then stopping and listening for some time. They hoped that they would see and stalk their opponents before they were seen and stalked.

On 6 August a patrol comprising CPL Tommy Navusolo's five-man section from Reconnaissance Platoon augmented with four tracker-qualified snipers moved to the top of the main ridgeline of Mount Leolaco at its northern end after hearing shots in the distance. They were following an old FALINTIL infiltration route. On top of the mountain they found a stand of gum trees and a flat, cool oasis of bushland. CPL Nichols, the appointed patrol commander from sniper section, decided to lie up for a while astride the track. He put his men down in a triangular position with light support weapons covering up and down the track as well as into a creek line parallel to the track.

Just before last light the patrol signaller, PTE Adam Bonnywell, visited PTEs Brad Conway and Glen Taylor at one of the machine-gun positions to pass a message. As he was doing so, a man walked up the track with his arms resting on an M-16 rifle he had slung from his neck. His head was down and he did not see the group. The Australians took aim. When he was about thirty metres away Bonnywell challenged him in Bahasa, 'Bihente! Bihente!' (Stop! Stop!).

The man reacted to Bonnywell's voice in a split second. In the blink of an eye, he had taken cover and swung his rifle around to its firing position. The Australians opened fire and he returned fire before he and a second armed man behind him, similarly dressed in a t-shirt and camouflage trousers, withdrew back to the half right of the Australian position into low ground. CPL Scott Beasley and LCPL Troy Weston, a sniper pair, had a fleeting glimpse of both infiltrators from the next Australian position but could not take aim at the men while they lay on the low ground hidden by the thick vegetation. The pair threw grenades into the low ground, but soon lost sight of the fleeing men as they ran down the slope and made good their escape.

While the first two infiltrators were escaping, the Australians came under fire from three more men with automatic weapons from a position to the rear of the point where they had contacted the first man. This group had closed up and opened fire to cover the escape of their two comrades. This was a well executed drill that took the initiative away from the Australians engaging the first two men, forcing the Australians to return fire at them, rather than pursuing the first two members of their group. For the next few minutes the Australians returned fire rapidly, also blasting their opponents with several 40-mm grenades.

As darkness fell, the infiltrators broke contact and withdrew back down the slope. The Australians swept forward to search the area but found nothing except expended cartridge cases.

This contact confirmed once again that the tactical advantage lay with those who were stationary. The Australians were surprised at the quick reactions and skill of their opponents. They had fought back from a tactical disadvantage to regain the initiative before withdrawing. The Australians had fired over 250 rounds without inflicting a single casualty. They had been unable to capitalise on the element of surprise and, despite observing and challenging the gunman, had missed hitting him at close range. This was a disappointing outcome for the well trained infantry. It took several hours for the patrol to settle down that night. The firefight made the men excitable and it was difficult for them to get to sleep. In the morning they followed the tracks of their opponents without success. For the remainder of August the 6 RAR Group combed Mount Leolaco and maintained surveillance of infiltration routes across the border. This was arduous, tiring work that demanded high-level bushcraft and constant vigilance. The groups coming across the border also displayed high levels of bushcraft and superb evasive tactics. Most groups were forced back across the border, with only a few managing to infiltrate the Kenyan area of operations and move through to the Central Sector near Dili where the Portuguese reported several sightings and contacts. In the opinion of Sergio Vieira do Mello, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Transitional Administrator in East Timor, militia groups, possibly supplemented by Indonesian military specialists, were conducting the reconnaissance phase in preparation for an insurgency against UNTAET. he was particularly grateful to the Australians for effectively blocking most of these groups and their efficiency in tracking and harassing them back into West Timor. By the end of September infiltrators appeared to have been deterred from attempting to penetrate the Australian area of operations.

Indonesian Incursion and a Night Crossing

In October 2000, 1st Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment Group (1 RAR Group), commanded by LTCOL John Caligari, a veteran from Somalia in 1993, replaced LTCOL Mick Moon and the 6 RAR Group on the border. By this time events in West Timor and tactical successes in East Timor had diffused, deterred and virtually stopped armed infiltration from West Timor into East Timor, though civilian traders and smugglers continued to move back and forward. Along the border Australian and Indonesian military relations were cordial. This was important because armed troops faced each other along a border that was not well marked for most of its length. Though just over a year had passed since the INTERFET intervention, Indonesian-Australian diplomatic relations were still being managed very carefully. There was potential for political and military overreaction if there was a clash on the border.

For the first half of 1 RAR Group's six-month tour of duty, there had been no evidence of military-style armed groups entering East Timor illegally. The challenge for junior leaders was to keep their men alert in these low threat circumstances. Caligari maintained a steady tempo of patrolling to deter anyone contemplating entering East Timor illegally. The main danger was that local hunters from both sides of the border who carried rifles would be mistaken for infiltrators. Fortunately, they did not venture out at night and the UN ROE was specific about UN troops only firing when directly threatened. If civilian hunters did not raise their weapons in a threatening manner against UN troops, then they were safe. The other danger was that Indonesian troops would move accidentally or carelessly over the border and respond with unnecessary aggression when challenged. Australia's strategic corporals still had a job to do.

Early one February morning at around 0400 a Blackhawk with its lights off swooped over a border area codenamed 'Oyster', located between Junction Points Alpha and Bravo, north of the Hakisak Salient, and came to a hover. The loadmaster lowered CPL Shane Young and his four-man reconnaissance patrol, 63 Charlie, to the ground using the hoist before directing the pilot to pull away and return to the base at Balibo. Young directed his scout, PTE Gary Wheeler, to patrol forward to an observation post. He planned to settle on the bank of the Nunura River to observe the Tactical Control Line that ran along the middle of the river bed that marked the border. The Australians reached the river bank just before first light and had time to conceal themselves in a thicket that overlooked the river before dawn broke.

Morning passed without Young's patrol sighting anything unusual. After lunch LCPL Karl Jordans moved forward to occupy an observation position while his comrades rested. Suddenly his heart began to pound with excitement. He saw the heads of a line of Indonesian soldiers wearing camouflage baseball caps emerging from a washout and heading towards his position, only five metres away. He could not determine whether they were armed as he could only see them from the chest up. Each wore a camouflage t-shirt. They walked purposefully in single file, although not in a manner suggesting that they were expecting any threat or were looking for a fight. He knew that the Indonesians would not discover the remainder of the patrol because they were on a track that led into a gully and on to a point where the river turned sharply. Jordans counted at least ten Indonesian soldiers and then a group of four civilian males dressed in shirts and traditional sarongs. Two were helping an elderly man along the track that ended around from Jordans' position in the flooded floor of a gully running knee deep in water. Jordans felt a rush of adrenalin and keen anticipation. The patrol was finally at the right place at the right time to observe an illegal border crossing. He was relieved that he and his compatriots could report a substantial incident after hours, days, weeks and months of uneventful patrolling. He was also curious about the intent of this group, and what CPL Young would decide to do once he had counted the group through and reported back.

Shane Young decided to follow the group along the flooded floor of the gully. This decision would test the skill and resolve of his men. The only sign of the Indonesians' presence was a line of discoloured water. Jordans reported that, while the men did not appear to be carrying long-barrelled weapons, he could not see whether they wore side arms or carried grenades. The civilians appeared to be unarmed, although they could have been carrying machetes.

Both sides of the gully offered good concealment for an ambush. If the Indonesians decided to break track and lay up to listen from the sides of the gully or to have a meal or a rest, Young and his patrol would walk right below them. After the patrol entered the gully, PTE Anthony Jones, who was carrying a vhF Wagtail radio, reported to Young that he had lost communication with battalion headquarters. If the patrol ran into trouble, they had no way of calling for reinforcements or an evacuation chopper. Young decided to press on regardless.

After moving about four hundred metres, watching and training their weapons along the sides of the gully and ahead, Gary Wheeler came to the edge of a line of sheoaks and spotted several Indonesians on the river bank, beyond eighty metres of open area. It was difficult to gauge their numbers and whether any of them were armed as some were out of sight down in the river bed and others were up on the bank walking around. As far as Wheeler could make out, some appeared to be looking out over the river and others were probably swimming in the river as boots and other clothing items were strewn around the bank. The group had walked around a high feature on the East Timor side of the river to get to where it turned.

Getting to the East Timor side of the river must have been important because it could only be reached by moving across the agreed Tactical Control Line into East Timor around the high feature.

After observing the Indonesians for around ten minutes, Young pulled back to the original position where Jones had confirmed contact with battalion headquarters to report back and seek guidance on what to do next. During this time Jones sent garbled fragments of sentences back to battalion headquarters. These fragments caused quite a stir. MAJ Mick Mumford and his operations staff were trying to piece together what was going on with Young's patrol from intermittent snippets of information such as 'group of Indonesians', 'following up', 'weapons', 'single file', 'swimming' and 'observing'. Not knowing whether his messages were getting through, Mumford told the patrol to observe and report back, and avoid contact with the Indonesians. He knew the patrol would try to establish contact as soon as it could.

Once the patrol returned to its original position, Jones crawled up to higher ground to set up a lightweight antennae and make contact. Young positioned himself, Jordans and Wheeler along a line that could cover the track if the Indonesians chose to return to West Timor using the same route. He positioned PTE Andrew Kaiser, who was both the patrol medic and machine-gunner, off to a flank with his Minimi Light Assault Weapon to cover the foot pad. Around fifteen minutes after moving into position, and while Jones continued his attempts to establish contact, the members of the patrol heard the Indonesians coming towards them through the gully.

Without the need for orders, Young gestured to Wheeler and Jordans that they were going to challenge the group. When the first twelve Indonesians were in front of them, strung out along the foot pad, Wheeler and Jordans moved forward and challenged them in Bahasa to stop and put their arms up. Young and Kaiser remained concealed, covering their comrades with their weapons, ready to cut down the Indonesians if any moved to raise a weapon to fire.

The surprise was complete. One of the Indonesians called out 'I don't speak English', in perfect English. Indeed none of the Indonesians spoke English and none of the Australians spoke Bahasa. A few seconds after the first group had been bailed up, Wheeler rounded up the remaining two Indonesians and four civilians. He gestured with the muzzle of his Steyr for them to join their companions.

It was clear from the looks on their faces and several emotional reactions that the Indonesians and civilians expected the heavily-armed Australians with blackened faces and a menacing, no-nonsense manner to shoot them then and there. Young assessed that there was no threat from the group. They were unarmed. He directed Wheeler and Jordans to move them to a small open space on the river bank below them. Jones moved out into the open and was finally able to achieve a clear transmission back to battalion headquarters. News that Young's patrol had detained fourteen Indonesian soldiers and four civilians and was seeking further guidance focused everyone's attention. LTCOL John Caligari was listening to the broadcast and ordered a specialist response team to fly in by Blackhawk and help out. Once the Blackhawk was in the air, the specialist commander quickly established contact with Jones. By this time the leader of the Indonesian group had come forward and Young had given him permission to use a hand-held radio to contact the Indonesian border post to report his situation and to request a senior officer be sent over to assist resolve the stand-off.

Soon after, a delegation of three Indonesian officers walked across the border carrying an Indonesian flag. In an impressive show, the specialists arrived and rappelled to the ground from

their hovering helicopter. The patrol commander took over. One of his men who spoke Bahasa was able to discover the reason for the Indonesians crossing the border with four civilians. Earlier that day two Indonesian soldiers had been swept away in a torrent of water further down the river. One had made it to the bank but the other had experienced difficulties and had disappeared. The elderly man was a seer who had advised the Indonesians that he could lead them to the soldier who had been swept away. He told them that he had seen the soldier in his mind's eye at the turn in the river. Believing that they were rescuing their comrade or at least recovering his body, an officer and thirteen soldiers had taken the considerable risk of crossing the border into East Timor to reach the location nominated by the seer who had agreed to accompany them with his three companions.

Once the patrol commander had briefed him over the radio, Caligari directed that the group be released to move back across the border. he contacted his Indonesian counterpart, LTCOL Agung, by radio and told him what had occurred. The incident had been handled professionally with no threat to life and no loss of face. had CPL Shane Young or any of his men overreacted to the sighting of the Indonesian search party and opened fire, the consequences of Australians shooting unarmed Indonesian officers and soldiers would have been disastrous for Australian–Indonesian relations and Australia's military reputation. Indeed, even rough handling of the Indonesian group once they had been detained would have had a similar effect.

Night crossing

Two weeks later CPL Shane Young's reconnaissance patrol was involved in another chance encounter with the Indonesians. Young was on leave so LCPL Jordans was acting patrol commander and PTE Matthew Vermey joined the patrol to make up the numbers. Jordans offered Young's 203-mm 'under and over' M-16 assault rifle with an attached grenade launcher to Vermey to carry. Vermey declined the offer because his webbing was not configured to carry 40-mm grenades. Gary Wheeler did not hesitate when Jordans offered the M203 to him. He had always wanted to carry the M203 as a scout to allow him to engage with grenades as well as rounds. M203s were usually only carried by patrol commanders and their seconds-in-command. Thus 63 Charlie began the patrol with Wheeler and Jordans carrying M203 grenade launchers at the front of the group.

This time 63 Charlie was headed for an area codenamed 'Foxley' on the Nunura River north-west of the Nunura Bridge. They were dropped off by vehicle on the northern side of the bridge and patrolled west in the dark wearing their Ninox night vision goggles. Their mission was to examine several potential crossing sites to see whether there were signs of recent use. Jordans was not impressed with the locations nominated in his orders. He had been in the area before and thought that there were more suitable crossing points further west. He found a lying-up place before first light and positioned his patrol there to wait for dawn. As the first rays of sun lit the surrounding areas, members of the patrol observed several men with dogs moving about hunting birds and wild pigs. The dogs chased down the pigs and the men used their spears and machetes to subdue their prey. Slingshots were used to kill the birds. The dogs discovered the patrol throughout the day, but the hunters ignored the soldiers, comforted by their presence. Jordans took Wheeler and Vermey for two short patrols: the first to explore the crossing sites nominated by battalion headquarters and the second to locate more likely crossing sites. They took photographs, but did not find signs of recent crossings. Jordans noticed a more promising crossing site and decided he would put in a night observation post nearby to determine whether it was being used by infiltrators.

After last light the patrol moved further west and occupied a night observation position that Jordans assessed had a good view overlooking where a creek fed into the river. Both the creek bed, with its two-metre high banks, and a nearby junction between two higher features were easily identifiable at night. Jordans thought that the area was a likely navigation check point to guide infiltrators in and out of East Timor. The first sentry duty fell to Gary Wheeler. He was able to see right across the river using a TSS thermal imager mounted on a tripod with an extended range lens. At about 2030, just thirty minutes into his piquet, he observed three men at a range of about 130 metres across the river heading towards the creek junction. All were wearing baseball caps. The first man was carrying a long-barrelled weapon, the second man was wearing a backpack and the third appeared to be unarmed and not carrying a load. All were barefoot. Fortunately, the members of the patrol were still awake. By the time the trio had crossed into East Timor, Jordans' patrol was alert and ready.

After fifteen minutes of working through what the signaller, PTE Jones, assessed to be deliberate jamming of the radio net, Jordans reported to battalion headquarters by radio. Mumford told him to stay where he was, while elements of MAJ Luke Blaine's B Coy and MAJ Tom Biedermann's C Coy moved into blocking positions to cut the trio off. An hour later Mumford ordered Jordans to move forward and set up a blocking position on the creek junction. After ordering everyone to hide their big packs in the vicinity, Jordans sent Wheeler forward and then followed. Behind him PTEs Kaiser, Jones and Vermey moved off in single file. Each man wore Ninox night vision goggles and was ready to turn on his night aiming device to spot anyone he encountered with a laser beam to assist in firing accurately. Unfortunately the 203 M-16 rifles that Wheeler and Jordans carried were not fitted with night aiming devices.

Jordans stopped the patrol thirty metres from the junction and gestured for Wheeler to accompany him to a good blocking position that would allow the patrol to cover up and down the creek bed and the junction area. As he and Wheeler approached the creek bank they observed the same trio they had seen earlier in the evening coming towards them from the other side of the creek. The first man carrying the long-barrelled weapon led his companions down the opposite bank and turned towards West Timor. Wheeler did not want them to get away. He called out in Tetum for them to stop. The lead man swung his weapon instinctively in Wheeler's direction and prepared to fire. Wheeler was quicker and fired a few aimed rounds on semi-automatic, then switched to automatic fire and raked the area with the remaining rounds in his magazine. A split second after he opened fire, Jordans joined in and also fired aimed rounds on semi-automatic before letting loose with the remainder of the rounds in his magazine on automatic. Wheeler was still reloading after Jordans had fired his magazine. Jordans filled the gap while Wheeler reloaded by firing a 40-mm grenade at the far bank where the three men had been. Wheeler and Jordans then pulled back, as they had done time and time again in training, covering each other. As soon as the firing had started, Kaiser, Jones and Vermey turned on their night aiming devices and their infra-red lamps and moved forward to the sounds of their comrades engaging the infiltrators. Within a few metres they found Wheeler and Jordans moving back in short bounds covering each other. They too had their infra-red lamps on and were easy to recognise in the dark. The patrol formed up quickly and instinctively moved into all-round defence. Kaiser trained his Minimi machine-gun towards the last known position of the infiltrators with Wheeler beside him. Jordans and Jones were behind them, reporting back over the radio to Mumford. Vermey covered the flanks and the rear of his comrades, sweeping the area with his infra-red lamp and looking forward through his night vision goggles.

As soon as Wheeler had opened fire, Jones sent the traditional message, 'Contact, wait out'. He reported back again when the patrol was safe on the ground in all-round defence. He told

Mumford that they had broken contact and there were no casualties within the patrol. Mumford, joined by Caligari, ordered Jordans to move forward and secure the contact site to see whether there were any casualties among the three infiltrators. The order to move forward towards an armed opponent at night aroused keen anticipation and fear among members of the patrol. Fear is a product of imagination—what if an armed man was wounded and lying in the creek bed waiting to take a shot? What if another man had grenades or a pistol in his pack and was also lying in wait? In reality, the Australians were more likely to find bodies, blood trails, or nothing.

They found nothing. Wheeler and Jordans moved forward to where their bullets had impacted. The holes were there, but their opponents were not. Despite the number of rounds impacting across the bank, they had moved rapidly, avoiding the hail of rounds and escaping undetected.

This last contact in February 2001 near the East Timor border echoed the fleeting nature of firefights at night. Sometimes corporals had to make decisions in split seconds after giving armed men a verbal challenge. This is one of the distinguishing features that separate peacekeeping from conventional war. Peacekeepers give their opponents the opportunity to decide on their response. Soldiers on a battlefield shoot to kill their enemy on sight.

Conclusions

On 20 September 1999, Australian troops arrived in Dili bearing the hopes and prayers of the Australian and East Timorese people. This was a high risk projection of military force into a neighbour's backyard to protect Australian national interests and a terrorised population. Australian sailors, soldiers and aircrew arrived when conditions in East Timor were most dangerous and volatile. The scale and speed of deployment was unprecedented in Australia's military history. The Australian people understood that it was more than simply the lives of their compatriots at stake. The future of Australia's relationship with its near neighbour Indonesia as well as Australia's standing in the region as a whole would be determined over a few critical days. For the first time in Australia's history its armed forces would operate and sustain themselves without substantial support from the United Kingdom or the US. Like the tactical tipping points on the Kokoda Track in New Guinea almost sixty years before and at Long Tan in Vietnam thirty-three years before, Australian troops would be outnumbered and logistically vulnerable.

Angry, hostile groups awaited Australian forces in Dili. Ordinary East Timorese welcomed protection from rampaging militia gangs. Renegade Indonesian soldiers and police were angry about the interruption of the final stages of their destruction of East Timor and displacement of its inhabitants. Thus, for different reasons, Australian corporals were in a close-quarter contest.

Creating deterrence and handling provocation

The question that had to be answered was, 'What should Australian junior leaders and small teams do when provoked or confronted by armed and unarmed hostile groups?' ROE governed the use of force. Deliberately breaching ROE was an illegal act. Getting the ROE wrong could be the difference between a charge of murder or a medal for bravery. Unlike conventional war, soldiers were not authorised to hunt, corner and kill.

Australian corporals and their men in Dili operated under immense pressure. Australian forces were expected to arrive on time and in good order, ready to achieve quick results. They arrived in Dili, with little sleep, carrying heavy loads of ammunition and water in a hot climate, and began patrolling straightaway. Thus, while sleep deprived, heavily burdened, unacclimatised and with little situational awareness, corporals had to maintain their own composure as well as control their troops while being provoked. They had to apply the ROE to the letter.

The UN gave INTERFET robust ROE. Australian corporals could shoot on-sight those carrying arms in a manner that threatened them or others. But it was more complicated than that because the imperative was not to trigger an escalation of hostilities with recalcitrant Indonesian military personnel who were running amok with their militia surrogates. Initially, Australian troops were both outnumbered and 'light on' for logistic support while at the same time carrying heavy personal loads of water and ammunition. They could ill afford to start a contest even though their ROE would have permitted them to open fire.

The preference on peace support operations is to never have to apply force. It is better to deter hostile groups rather than engage them. It is difficult to describe or define what the term 'establish a deterrent presence' really means. In Dili, Australian troops carried their weapons 'at the ready' and were dressed in body armour and webbing, and wore helmets and sunglasses. They quickly detained and restrained any East Timorese behaving suspiciously. There were criticisms in the media and from some Asian capitals that the demeanour of troops and their response to suspicious behaviour was heavy-handed. No one appeared to doubt the intentions of Australian troops. They asserted their legal right to control the streets by patrolling aggressively, but not firing their weapons or resorting to physical violence.

Overall, the professionalism of junior officers and corporals was key to Australian tactical success in Dili and on the East Timor border. They ensured that their men responded in controlled, measured ways to provocation. Indonesian military personnel and militia learned that the Australians were tough, but not brutal. Under intense physical pressure, Australian infantrymen demonstrated that they preferred to put their bodies on the line and, as a platoon commander stated, 'face the music' rather than fire into an unarmed stone-throwing crowd. Corporals in Dili did not fire at provocateurs.

Policing and soldiering

Dili was a difficult city to secure. There was no effective police force, judiciary or corrective services maintaining law and order. Crimes against persons and property were common. Economy had collapsed. There were no local authorities delivering essential services such as water, power, health, sanitation or waste disposal. Fortunately, international aid agencies were on hand to provide food and other necessities for impoverished and destitute people, many of whom were displaced and traumatised. The protection of these agencies was paramount to allow them to deliver humanitarian aid that otherwise might be expected of the military in emergency 'life and death' circumstances.

Whether Australian troops should become involved in law enforcement was an important issue, especially since soldiers were not trained to be police. Local police were either non-existent or non-effective. It took some time before police were out on patrol. In the interim, soldiers had a duty to protect life and property. While all of these activities could be justified within the context of creating a secure environment, the detention of East Timorese acting suspiciously were policing tasks. Indeed, these actions increased the possibility of 'pay back' and an escalation

in violence. Corporals and their men had to carefully calibrate their responses to threatening situations and criminal activity. They were police by default. They had to be versatile enough to deter and react decisively to armed threat and react proportionally to other situations when they were not directly threatened but civilians required protection.

Ordinary citizens, minding their own business and getting on with life, began to feel safe. It was not the Australians' responsibility to clean up East Timorese society. But they were involved in protecting ordinary citizens, especially women and children, from violence. Policing is also about community relations. Australians adopted a typically firm, fair and friendly attitude towards ordinary East Timorese, complemented by personal generosity and good humour. The body language, eye contact and tone of voice of the vast majority of Australians gave ordinary people a 'fair go'. Language and cultural barriers may have precluded genuine friendship, but the body language and messages sent through the eyes showed that each affirmed the other's humanity and empathy with their respective circumstances.

This widespread positive and friendly interaction with the community helped to create a secure environment by reducing the tension many citizens undoubtedly felt with the arrival of unfamiliar, heavily armed foreign troops in their midst. Most importantly, the friendly attitude of the Australians led many East Timorese to offer information that anticipated and diffused security threats from hostile groups. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this information. In Dili it took ten days to take control of the streets.

An added bonus for citizens was a decline in the level of violence. The high tempo of Australians patrolling 24 hours a day and the willingness of patrol commanders to respond to acts of lawlessness and to search for and confiscate weapons placed considerable pressure on militia groups in East Timor. In this climate, indigenous authorities were able to reassert some control.

The media factor

The level of media interest for the arrival and subsequent operations in East Timor placed Australian corporals and their men on the world stage under arduous conditions and in stressful circumstances. The Australians secured an airfield, a heliport, a port, a sports stadium, an abandoned UN compound and buildings to use as headquarters, storage and parking areas, and to accommodate troops within a few hours. All this was achieved while hostile groups sped around the city in trucks brandishing weapons and looting and then setting buildings on fire.

All of these initial tasks were completed under the scrutiny of journalists, video camera crews and photographers. The arrival of INTERFET was headlined around the world and was covered 'live' by major international news organisations. First impressions were crucial for increasing the confidence of nations considering making contributions to East Timor. The successful conduct of the first 72 hours of operations in Dili secured the dispatch of international contingents that were to follow. Some regional and international contributions may have not have eventuated had there been an escalation in hostilities between Australian and Indonesian forces as a result of an act of ill-discipline by either side.

Close media scrutiny of the arrival and initial forays by forces deployed overseas has been and will continue to be the norm. The challenge for commanders will be to ensure that their troops understand the importance of media coverage and accept it as part of their mission, and not as an intrusion. This is work for strategic corporals who need to understand the big picture and be provided the best opportunity to create positive images.

Operations in East Timor did not allow pause for breath or the luxury of mistakes. Australian corporals had to achieve initial success, and do so in those first few days while the world looked on. All went well, and the media then turned its attention to the next news story. The crisis in East Timor was pushed off front pages and ceased headlining television news programs. These were important victories in the Information Age.

Disciplined use of fire

The decisive, controlled and aggressive responses of Australian patrols under fire contributed significantly to their success on the border in East Timor in 1999–2000. Corporals ensured that their troops did not fire at anything suspicious, especially at night, but directed them to return fire when fired upon, or split seconds before they were engaged. Most times, corporals did not have to shout out orders under fire. They could rely on their troops to exercise sound judgment during firefights or when deciding whether or not to open fire.

Corporals rehearsed and drilled their troops during training. Poor fire discipline would have stirred up and unsettled Dili rather than diffusing tension and uncertainty. Poor fire discipline on the border could have escalated hostilities between Indonesian and Australian forces. At Suai, Motaain, Aidabasalala and on Mount Leolaco disciplined but decisive returns of fire ended confrontations in favour of Australian patrols.

Firefights do not tell the full story of the contest between Australian corporals and hostile groups. There were many times when Australian patrols decided not to fire and showed commendable restraint under pressure. Australians held their fire and did not retaliate unless directly threatened. This restraint was not misinterpreted as weakness or indecisiveness. Body language and verbal communications accompanied the decision not to fire and left no doubt that Australian troops were ready and willing to fire if those opposing them looked like they were pulling their triggers. Offensive action would prompt lethal reaction. In Dili, militia and renegade Indonesian troops and East Timorese auxiliaries chose not to open fire on Australian patrols.

The Australian Army's competitive edge

Australians arrived in East Timor with seven tactical advantages:

1. their individual training
2. teamwork
3. physical and mental toughness
4. superior weapons
5. flak jackets/body armour
6. low level communications, and
7. night vision technology

1. The demanding standards of individual training maintained by the Australian Army endowed each member of the 1 RAR Group and INTERFET with high levels of personal and professional confidence in themselves, their weapons, their commanders and those around them. This situation not only applied to infantrymen on patrol but also to the cavalrymen, engineers, signallers, medics, drivers, administrative staff and others who supported operations. This reality affirmed the Australian Army policy of training every member to be combat-ready and able to handle weapons effectively and safely, no matter the specialisation.

2. Rigorous collective training and the Australian Army's investment in the career development of junior NCOs resulted in the high standard of teamwork evident in East Timor. In the early 1990s the career development of Australian soldiers began with twelve weeks of rigorous recruit training. Specially selected recruit training staff, mostly experienced, specially-selected and specifically-trained corporals, bound recruits together in an adversarial, high-pressure and deliberately time-limited environment in which they had to depend on one another to perform their allocated tasks. Having been bound together under pressure, recruits were then bonded in small teams through the shared experience of tough, physically and mentally demanding training that also tested and developed character. Recruits who had arrived as individuals with different backgrounds and life experiences became members of teams, conscious that to complete recruit training their efforts had to contribute to the success of their team. In the final phase of recruit training, the staff who had created the initially demanding adversarial environment for newly-arrived recruits took the lead in building recruit platoons for arduous competition. They became leadership role models as platoons competed against one another to demonstrate superior physical endurance and military competence. Each platoon was built as an exemplar of how similar-sized groups would operate in a competitive operational environment.

Following this rigorous twelve-week period of binding, bonding and building, recruits graduated as trained soldiers to their corps to become specialists such as gunners, infantrymen, engineers, medical assistants, clerks and signallers. This initial employment training would last for several months before individuals would finally arrive at their units ready for duty. After a year or more, commanders would allow those soldiers who displayed leadership qualities increased responsibility for the efforts of others. They would then select the best of these soldiers for promotion courses to prepare them to command small teams in combat settings as well as within their corps. Typically, these promotion courses would be a variant of the binding, bonding and building model, with more emphasis placed on training and testing students in command of small teams of fellow students.

The corporals leading patrols in Dili and on the border in 1999–2000 subsequently were the products of this training cycle and, on average, had at least two years' experience commanding their sections. Platoon commanders and sergeants came and went on posting. Corporals were the bedrock on which the 1 RAR Group and Australian battalion groups were built. These junior leaders and their small teams were at the cutting edge and through their actions preserved the reputation of the Australian Defence Force as a disciplined organisation capable of the right balance of aggression and compassion during humanitarian interventions.

3. The physical toughness required for operations came not only from traditional daily physical fitness programs, battle conditioning activities and hard training regimens, but also from competitive inter and intra-unit sport. Mental toughness came from the physical and mental challenges of demanding training and from a strong individual and collective ethos that the Australian Army meant business. Diggers believed that they had the courage and ability to accomplish their missions and looked forward to a contest with anyone who would oppose them.

4. In 1999 the Army had equipped high readiness units with night sights for rifles, machine guns and higher calibre weapons, laser designators to pinpoint where rounds would impact and modern lightweight night vision goggles and thermal imagers. This technology increased the competitive edge of foot, vehicle and helicopter patrols significantly. There had also been upgrades in low level communications that enabled individuals to communicate with their commanders and others in their team through headsets, leaving both hands free to operate weapons.

5. Flak jackets were issued to all diggers, and the East Timorese militia believed these to be bullet-proof. This perception caused them to hesitate in engaging Australian troops and subsequently saved more lives.

6 & 7. East Timorese and Indonesian lives were saved by night vision technology and low level communications. Australian forward scouts wearing night vision goggles held their fire more often than they might have if their only visibility of the intentions of people ahead and around the patrol had been dependent on the moonlight. The goggles also acted as a deterrent. Diggers wearing night vision goggles caused comment. Once East Timorese and Indonesians deduced that the goggles enabled the wearer to see at night, hostile individuals and groups contemplating hit and run attacks on Australian patrols probably decided that it was not worth the risk.

The Australian Army's investment in recruiting, initial employment training, career development of junior NCOs, and investment in weapons and night vision technology paid handsome dividends. Though not described in this publication, more recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan confirm that this investment continues to prove its worth. The measures of success continue to be negligible casualty rates; a reputation for decisive and legal use of lethal force; a firm, fair and friendly attitude towards the local populace; and an almost complete absence of careless and improper personal behaviour. This proud record is glowing testament to the quality of the Australian Army's junior leaders and the soldiers they command. As these veterans from East Timor progress through the ranks, Australians can feel justifiably confident that the future of their army is in safe hands.

Note: This article is abridged from "Study paper #314, The World Looking Over Their Shoulders: Australian Strategic Corporals On Operations In Somalia and East Timor," originally published in August 2008 by the Land Warfare Studies Centre, Canberra, Australia.

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