

How Success Can Be Messy in Hunt for Terrorists

Wall Street Journal Sept 11, 2002 Pg A12

By JAMES HOOKWAY

ZAMBOANGA CITY, Philippines—When the U.S. traced tendrils of the al Qaeda network to the Philippines and sent in troops in February, military officials from both nations had high hopes.

Osama bin Laden had eluded the U.S.'s dragnet in Afghanistan, while Philippine soldiers had spent months fruitlessly chasing a tiny band of separatist rebels through the jungle. With a U.S. commitment to help wipe out the Abu Sayyaf rebels and rescue their two American hostages, a much-needed public-relations victory seemed imminent.

Instead, they were left with a messy mission. A detailed account of the six-month campaign, little of which has been made public, shows how as the U.S. takes its war on terrorism to hot spots around the globe, its broad goals can be complicated by local circumstances and unexpected twists.

In this case, even a mission that military officials from both countries defined as successful was extremely messy and carried a heavy cost. U.S. surveillance equipment failed to pierce the dense jungle at a crucial moment, leaving local troops to track the rebels through the mud. Hampered by heavy rain, Philippine forces nearly stumbled into the rebels' jungle camp, sparking a deadly firefight. Big breakthroughs in the search included following the thermal image of a pizza and the discovery of designer underwear on the jungle floor.

Abu Sayyaf was established with help from Mr. bin Laden's brother-in-law in the early 1990s. Led by Abu Sabaya, a criminology dropout with a penchant for \$120 Oakley sunglasses, the group became well known in recent years for kidnappings. Two years ago, it raised \$15 million from kidnapping foreign tourists in the Malaysian resort of Sipadan.

The group struck again in May 2001. This time, three of Mr. Sabaya's hostages were Americans, his favorite target. One was executed, and missionary couple Martin and Gracia Burnham were kept prisoner.

Then an unexpected shift in U.S. policy brought a standoff closer. In February, the Bush administration backed away from the U.S.'s longstanding vow never to negotiate with terrorists. Its new policy was to



"make every effort" to secure the release of American hostages. That included offering support when private groups started ransom talks.

With this tacit nod, the Burnham family and the New Tribes Mission to which Martin and Gracia belonged began raising cash, U.S. military officials say. They pulled together \$300,000—some of it from federal coffers, U.S. officials say.

Talks moved swiftly. But the negotiators were dealing with the wrong faction of the Abu Sayyaf, a loose-knit alliance of rebel chieftains. Instead of going to Mr. Sabaya, the money went to another Abu Sayyaf leader, Khadaffi Janjalani.

After learning of the mix-up, an enraged Mr. Sabaya called Mr. Janjalani to demand a share of the money and was rebuffed. "But I have the hostages," he said before hanging up, according to recordings of the call.

Mr. Sabaya didn't have much time to wallow in his frustration. By May 27, the Philippine military decided to launch a full military assault on the rebels. That assault, like the rest of the operation, involved surprises, creativity and luck.

Philippine troops, with U.S. officers helping in the planning (the Philippine Constitution prevented them from playing a combat role), located Mr. Sabaya by tracking the signal from his satellite phone. But they needed to know if he still had the hostages. To find out, they tried a novel tactic: They tracked the thermal images from take-away pizzas.

Mr. Sabaya regularly used couriers to

deliver hamburgers, fried chicken and pizza to his hostages in the jungle, confidential military documents say.

The pizzas, delivered piping-hot to an Abu Sayyaf courier, worked particularly well. An unmanned spy plane would track the thermal image on a boat as it made its way out of Zamboanga City's crowded harbor. Then, the spy plane could easily follow it north to Mr. Sabaya's hideout near the village of Sibuco.

"We had to make sure the pizza was hot," says Col. Juancho Sabban of the Philippine marines, who led the search. "Otherwise we would have lost the trail."

The showdown came June 7. With torrential rains hampering electronic surveillance, Col. Sabban sat in Zamboanga City worrying the rebels might slip away again. "The jungle is so thick, the heat-imaging equipment couldn't penetrate the foliage," Col. Sabban recalls.

Instead, forces relied on what Col. Sabban called "old-fashioned human intelligence." For instance, scouts found a brand-new pair of Playboy underpants in the undergrowth.

"We thought they belonged to the Abu Sayyaf," Cpl. Rodelio Tuazon says. "Woodcutters couldn't afford them."

Then, before they realized how close they were, the soldiers nearly stumbled into Abu Sayyaf. A group of armed men was spotted about 20 yards away. As three rangers inched down a steep slope for a closer look, rocks loosened by the wet weather tumbled down with them. Worried that Mr. Sabaya would order the Burnhams killed, the rangers "had no choice but to open fire," Col. Sabban says.

Fifteen minutes later, four rebels were dead. The rangers found Mr. Burnham slumped over his wife, shot in the back at close range, according to the Philippine military's report. Mrs. Burnham was wounded in the leg. A few yards away, rangers found the body of a third hostage, Deborah Yap. Mr. Sabaya, however, escaped with 11 of his men.

The Philippine military, listening in on Mr. Sabaya's phone calls, caught up with him before dawn on June 21. He was trying to flee the area around Sibuco on an outrigger boat on which two undercover agents posed as crew members.

A speedboat carrying 16 Philippine ma-
Please Turn to Page A13, Column 1

Military Operation Against Abu Sayyaf Was Messy 'Success'

Continued From Page A12

times waited in the darkness. An unmanned spy plane flew overhead. Higher in the sky, a U.S. Orion aircraft circled, taking photographs. Two inflatable boats of U.S. Navy SEALs came along to videotape the ambush, and a twin-rotor Chinook helicopter fitted with a powerful spotlight was poised to fly to the scene.

Capt. Gieram Aragonces commanded the marine speedboat. Once again, the tactics were unorthodox. His orders were to tackle the rebels out on open water, ramming their boat and hopefully stunning them into submission. At 4:20 a.m., the marines began to speed across the waves, the pilot using night-vision goggles. Just as his boat approached the outrigger, Capt. Aragonces switched on two searchlights—a prearranged signal that allowed the two undercover crewmen to jump to safety. The speedboat hit the outrigger broadside at full speed, and the startled rebels opened fire. The Chinook, Pentagon officials say, then swooped in and powered up its spotlight. With the sea bathed in light, the marines raked the crippled Abu Sayyaf boat with their automatic weapons. Mr. Sabaya was hit at least a dozen times, Capt. Aragonces says, although the body wasn't recovered.

The U.S., meanwhile, has pared back its role in the Philippines. U.S. officials say they have rebuffed Filipino requests to finish off the remnants of Abu Sayyaf, who are on the remote island of Jolo with a new clutch of hostages. Six local Jehovah's Witnesses were kidnapped last month selling Avon cosmetics door to door. So far, two have been beheaded.

—Greg Jaffe in Washington