VEN with the on-going peace negotiations between the government and the Muslim rebels, the security situation in Mindanao is so volatile that even a small incident could trigger an all-out war.

How much more the kidnapping of a foreign priest and the beheadings of soldiers? Recently, these two incidents led to the unleashing of the military arsenal in Basilan, Mindanao which predictably resulted again in loss of more lives, destruction of property and displacement of thousands of civilians.

War in Mindanao
RENEWED OFFENSIVE, RENEWED COST

The kidnapping
The Philippines once again caught the attention of the international community with the latest kidnapping incident of a foreign national. Fr. Giancarlo Bossi, 57, the parish priest of Payao town, Zamboanga Sibugay was seized on June 10, 2007 while on his way to celebrate mass in Barangay Bulawan in the same municipality. The Italian priest was a member of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (or Pontificio Instituto Missioni Estere, PIME).

The only difference this time was that a renegade Muslim separatist, not the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), admitted to the kidnapping. Also, that it was committed in Zamboanga Sibugay Province and not anywhere in Basilan where previous high profile kidnapping cases were instigated.

The Philippine government also tagged the Abu Sayyaf as a terrorist organization despite allegations that it is a creation of the Philippine military as a paramilitary group.

Rescue operation
With pressure from the international community, Mrs. Arroyo ordered the rescue operations. Military operations ensued in pursuit of the possible perpetrators. This is the usual scenario whenever kidnapping happens in the country.

What was unusual however was the fact that the military operations were not concentrated in Zamboanga Sibugay Province, despite reports that the abducted priest was being held somewhere within the province. A top police official received a text message disclosing that Fr. Bossi was being kept in Kulasian cave in Payao, Zamboanga Sibugay. Yet the military operation was highlighted in Basilan Province, even when the League of Provincial Mayors pointed out that the priest had not been sighted in Basilan. One mayor explained that it was difficult to transfer Fr. Bossi due to the inclement weather.

Why insist on Basilan?
Basilan Province, an island-province south of Zamboanga City, is the home turf of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Set up in the early 1990s, the ASG is the smallest of the Muslim rebel groups in the Philippines, with 400 members. But it is one of the most notorious – if not the most notorious – rebel groups operating in the country. It is blamed for kidnappings, bombings, and beheadings in the Philippines. The US has listed the group as a terrorist organization and says it has links to Al-Qaeda, the primary suspect in the 9/11 attacks in the US.

Immediately after the said
terror strikes, the United States spearheaded a global campaign against terrorism to which the Philippine government, being a close US ally, has faithfully committed its political and military support.

It was also under the auspices of the war on terror that the US government through the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) has poured millions of dollars worth of military aid and technical assistance to the Philippine military’s counter-insurgency drive against the ASG.

The Philippine government also tagged the Abu Sayyaf as a terrorist organization despite allegations that it is a creation of the Philippine military as a paramilitary group.

**July 10 “Ambush”**

In what was claimed as an effort to rescue the kidnapped priest, members of the 1st Marine Brigade carried out an “intelligence-driven” operation in Basilan on July 10, 2007. The target was an alleged ASG camp.

The ensuing clash between the military and members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Brgy. Guinanta, Al-Barka, Basilan lasted eight hours. The encounter claimed the lives of five (5) members of the BIAF-MILF and twenty three (23) from the Marine troops. Several others were wounded.

At about 5:00 in the afternoon, a ceasefire was proclaimed. Both forces conducted clearing operations then withdrew from the area of hostilities, bringing along with them their respective wounded and casualties.

But the following day, the MILF found seven (7) dead bodies, all of them beheaded. Six (6) were identified as members of the Marine troops; the seventh was that of a 69-year-old Imam (Muslim religious leader) identified as Matarul Hakanul.

The MILF accused the Marines of the Imam’s beheading while disclaiming responsibility for the beheading of the Marines.

This incident raised widespread indignation from different sectors of society especially from politicians and the military and was later publicized as an “ambush” of military troops by the Muslim rebels resulting in the death of 14 marines, ten of which were decapitated.

In reaction to the beheadings, the military with the approval of the President, launched an all-out offensive against the alleged perpetrators, the ASG, despite pleas from the religious groups and peace advocates for the authorities to explore other means to resolve the conflict to avert further escalation of hostilities not only in Basilan but in other areas of Mindanao.

It should also be noted that the target of the July 10 operation which was supposedly an alleged ASG camp turned out to be a legitimate MILF territory recognized by the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) under its ongoing peace talks with the MILF.

**In search of peace:** A prayer rally held at the Blue Mosque, Taguig City, August 31, 2007. Photo: Anak Mindanao website

**Ceasefire agreement**

Through the course of the on-going three-year peace process between the MILF and the GRP, both parties and their respective armed forces

**Triumphalism:** To a lot of Muslims, military presence in Mindanao has not contributed to their yearning for a peaceful homeland.

Photo: PhilRights photobank
have agreed to and adopted the Ground Rules for a Ceasefire Agreement. Under this protocol, AFP troop movements in MILF areas require prior coordination with the rebels and vice-versa.

Evidently, the Ceasefire Agreement was not honored when members of the 1st Marine Brigade conducted the July 10 operation in a recognized MILF area without the required prior coordination.

However, media and military reports on the July 10 incident failed to mention this violation of the ceasefire agreement but instead focused on the beheadings of the marines. This could be explained by the fact that the press was more preoccupied with the sensational aspect of the event and the military was too eager to generate negative publicity against the rebels.

The media attention on the beheadings also overshadowed the obvious conclusion that the July 10 operations was supposedly an “intelligence-driven” rescue attempt for Fr. Bossi ended up as a disaster from all perspectives.

Clearly, the costly operation which was paid for with human lives on the sides of both the soldiers and the rebels, did not result in the freedom of Fr. Bossi. Neither did it pinpoint the priest’s whereabouts. Its only achievement was to undermine the on-going peace negotiations that have been painstakingly built not only by the government and the MILF but also by the people belonging to different peace movements in Mindanao.

**Fr. Bossi’s release**

Eventually, Fr. Bossi was freed unharmed in Lanao del Norte on July 19, 2007. It was indeed a timely occasion for Mrs. Arroyo’s scheduled travel abroad on the same week.

It was a timely coincidence that while the Arroyo administration gains international recognition for the safe release of Fr. Bossi, the ASG gained further notoriety for the beheadings of the ten marines.

Obviously, the Philippine government needed to highlight the role of the ASG before the international community to sustain its popularity among the countries that comprise the anti-terror “coalition of the willing,” especially the United States. The Abu Sayyaf is the Philippine’s ace up its sleeves, its most valuable asset in cementing its ties with the US that translates to financial assistance and military support.

In fact, aside from the millions of dollars of military aid and technical assistance for the counterinsurgency against the Abu Sayyaf through the VFA, the US government has given the biggest reward (Php 450 million) to Filipino informants that led to the killing of ASG chief Khaddafy Janjalani.

Moreover, the US troops stationed in Sulu are giving assistance to Filipino troops that are tracking down the Abu Sayyaf. The Americans had been training Filipino soldiers in the fight against terrorism since 2002. A US official claims that the exchange of military expertise between the two countries has hastened and intensified the campaign against terrorism in Sulu.

**Renewed offensive**

Based on the MILF-GRP joint panel findings on the July 10 beheadings, the government launched a series of military offensives against the indicted perpetrators, the ASG and raided a camp of the group. From mid-July to August this year, nine (9) battalions were deployed in Basilan alone to hunt 80 ASG fighters.

These military operations resulted in the displacement of 2,295 families from eight (8) municipalities in Basilan.

As usual, the ensuing conflict left a trail not only of violence and bloodshed but massive human rights violations affecting the people of Basilan and Sulu.

**Reckoning the cost**

**Right to Security**

Valuing one’s right to be secured of his/her person, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) pronounced under Art. III, “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

Human security means, first, safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease and repression. And second, protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in patterns of daily life (whether in homes, jobs, communities). Loss of human security can be human-made (wrong policy choices), stem from the forces of nature, or both.

The all-out war policy of the government in Basilan and Sulu has caused human insecurity among the populace, sowing fear and threats of oppression from State actors:

“...soldiers were firing indiscriminately although they knew where the ASG were situated. The soldiers are only tough with the civilians. Earlier at 2:00 in the morning (August 17), they took with them 9 women, 8 men and some children from Tanjung. Until now, they are still detained at 104th brigade.” (Aug 18, 2007)

“Some members of the AFP are conducting house to house search in Mubarakat, Isabela City, Basilan tonight. This is a brazen violation. Or is this another form of legalized anti-terror campaign?” (Aug 19, 2007)

“Full military operations. They capture any suspected rebels, many now detained in the brigade. IDPs are multiplying.”
Right of Abode
The freedom to choose the place of residence is a duly accorded right of every person enshrined in different human rights instruments, both at the national and international level.

The right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state has been recognized under Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

In the same manner, the 1987 Philippine Constitution provides that the liberty of abode and of changing the same within the limits prescribed by law shall not be impaired except upon lawful order of the court (Art III, Sect 6 thereof).

Nonetheless, alleged encounters between the military and the ASG have dramatically increased the number of internally displaced persons (IDP) in the area. Several alleged encounters including two incidents on August 7 and 8 resulted in the forced eviction of 14,888 persons or individuals or 2,934 families from fifteen (15) barangays in four (4) municipalities.

Right to Education
According to the United Nations (UN), education is crucial for the holistic development of every person and instrumental in realizing their other rights.

Article 26 of the UDHR states that “Everyone has the right to education…Elementary education shall be compulsory, free and available to all.

At the national level, Article XIV of the Philippine Constitution states, “The State shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels and shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible.”

But during the military operations in Basilan and Sulu, eleven (11) elementary schools were forced to shut down. Aside from this, public schools are usually converted as evacuation centers during armed conflicts resulting in suspension of classes for indefinite periods of time.

Right to Food
As the number of innocent civilians affected by the hostilities in Basilan and Sulu grew, different sectors of society appealed to the Arroyo government to order a cessation of military operations.

Instead, PCMA went on to pronounce an all-out war in Basilan and Sulu and ordered the military to continue pursuing the ASG elements responsible for the beheading of the marines.

Along with the declaration of a news blackout in Basilan, a food blockade was also enforced by the military in some localities in the province.

Right to Religion
Of equal importance is the right to religion which the UDHR affirms under Article 18: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion…this right includes the right to manifest his religion or teaching, practice, worship and observance”.

Similarly, the Philippine Constitution recognizes under Article III, Section 5 “The free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination shall forever be allowed…”

In its campaign against the New People’s Army (NPA), it has been the practice of the government to declare ceasefires during Christian holidays especially during Christmas season.

The operation against the ASG in Basilan and Sulu was conducted during the Islamic observance of Ramadan. As quoted in the news, Defense Sec. Teodoro said, “Military operations will still be mounted against Abu Sayyaf bandits in Sulu and Basilan even during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan which begins on Sept 15”.

This blatant disregard of one of the main pillars of Islam (fasting during Ramadan) showed the cultural insensitivity of the government and a clear violation of the Muslim peoples’ right to religion. The government should be reminded that this right is a composite of the right to one’s belief and the exercise of such belief.

In the final analysis, the UN pointed out that the two major components of human security are freedom from fear and freedom from want:

“The battle of peace has to be fought on two fronts. The first is the security front where victory spells freedom from fear. The second is the economic and social fronts, where victory means freedom from want. Only victory on both fronts can ensure the world of an enduring peace…No provisions that can be written into Charter will enable the Security Council to make the world secure from war if men and women have no security in their homes and their jobs.” (1945, US Secretary of State).3

SOURCES
Moro Human Rights Center (MHRC) in Basilan

1 Testimonies of the paralegal volunteers of the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) in SULU. PAHRA.

2 ZAMBAAUTA area in Mindanao.