

BROTHERS WHO BROUGHT DEATH AND RUIN TO PHILIPPINE CITY

MARAWI, Philippines: Twenty years after obtaining Christian educations, Muslim brothers Omarkhayam and Abdullah Maute returned to their southern Philippine city with the black flags of the Islamic State group and set fire to their alma mater. Hundreds of gunmen, many of them young locals recruited by the Maute brothers, destroyed Dansalan College in a rampage across Marawi city last month as they launched a brutal offensive to stamp their credentials as Philippine leaders of IS.

It turned the siblings, aged in their mid-30s, into the most infamous high school alumni of the Protestant Church-run institution, which had been a symbol of religious tolerance in the mostly Muslim city of 200,000 people. The brothers have since remained holed up in parts of Marawi, using their local knowledge of tunnels and bomb-proof basements, to withstand a military offensive that has left entire neighborhoods in ruins and claimed more than 300 lives. "We do not understand where that hate is coming from," said Zia Alonto Adiong, a member of the regional parliament in a self-ruled Muslim area in the southern Philippines' Mindanao region that includes Marawi. Duma Sani, an ex-dean of Mindanao State University whose daughter also went to school with one of the Maute brothers, said most locals did not support their radical brand of Islam, under which non-believers must be killed. "These (Marawi gunmen) are young people who have their own interpretation of the Quran and who do not respect their own elders," Sani told AFP.



This screen grab taken from handout video released yesterday shows Abdullah Maute (right) looking at an improvised map of Marawi, while Isnilon Hapilon (second left), leader of the hardline group Abu Sayyaf looks on, as they plan an attack on Marawi at an undisclosed location on Mindanao island. —AFP

The Maute group emerged as a small rag-tag group around 2012 from a decades-old Muslim separatist rebellion in Mindanao, which makes up one third of the predominantly Catholic Philippines. As

the main rebel organization - the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) - sought to broker peace with the government, the Maute and other small hardline groups filled a vacuum for fanatics as they took

inspiration from IS' atrocities in Iraq and Syria. "I think what transformed the Mautes from a small band of siblings to a real serious military threat was the emergence of ISIS in the Middle East," security analyst Sidney Jones told AFP, using an alternative acronym. But the brothers were radicalised much earlier: While pursuing studies in the Middle East after college, according to Jones and Rommel Banlaoi, head of the Manila-based Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research. Omarkhayam headed to Egypt's Al-Azhar University, while Abdullah went to Jordan. Banlaoi said they returned to Mindanao after about a decade away to be mentored by a fugitive Indonesian militant, Ustadz Sanussi, who in turn put them in touch with other Southeast Asian jihadists, notably the Malaysian bomb-maker Zulkifli bin Hir.

Family affair

With an engineer father and a mother involved in construction and property development, the Mautes are part of Muslim Mindanao's elite. They also have blood ties to one of the top MILF leaders, according to Banlaoi. "These connections gave the group a measure of protection," Banlaoi said. Since the conflict erupted, the mother and father have been arrested. Authorities have said the arrest of the mother was particularly important, describing her as a financier of the group. All her seven sons are believed to be involved in the Marawi conflict, according to Banlaoi. —AFP



MARAWI, Philippines: A Philippine marine, resting after having been at the frontline, reads a letter sent by students in Marawi on the southern island of Mindanao yesterday. — AFP

IS THREAT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA RAISES ALARM IN WASHINGTON

AREA BECOMING NEW HUB FOR LOCAL, FOREIGN FIGHTERS

WASHINGTON: Southeast Asia's jihadis who fought by the hundreds for the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria now have a different battle closer to home in the southern Philippines. It's a scenario raising significant alarm in Washington. The recent assault by IS-aligned fighters on the Philippine city of Marawi has left more than 300 people dead, exposing the shortcomings of local security forces and the extremist group's spreading reach in a region where counterterrorism gains are coming undone.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis told Congress last week a long-running US military operation to help Philippine forces contain extremist fighters was canceled prematurely three years ago. Small numbers of US special forces remain in an "advise and assist" role, and the US is providing aerial surveillance to help the Philippines retake Marawi, an inland city of more than 200,000 people.

But lawmakers, including from President

Donald Trump's Republican Party, want a bigger US role, short of boots on the ground. They fear the area is becoming a new hub for Islamist fighters from Southeast Asia and beyond. "I don't know that ISIS are directing operations there but they are certainly trying to get fighters into that region," said Republican Sen Joni Ernst of Iowa, using another acronym for the group. "We need to address the situation. It should not get out of control."

US intelligence and counterterrorism officials note that IS has publicly accepted pledges from various groups in the Philippines. In a June 2016 video, it called on followers in Southeast Asia to go to the Philippines if they cannot reach Syria. About 40 foreigners, mostly from neighboring Indonesia and Malaysia, have been among 500 involved in fighting in Marawi, the Philippine military says. Reports indicate at least one Saudi, a Chechen and a Yemeni killed. In all, more than 200 militants

have died in the standoff, now in its fourth week. Video obtained by AP from the Philippine military indicates an alliance of local Muslim fighters, aligned with IS, are coordinating complex attacks. They include the Islamic State's purported leader in Southeast Asia: Isnilon Hapilon, a Filipino on Washington's list of most-wanted terrorists, with a \$5 million bounty on his head. US officials are assessing whether any of the estimated 1,000 Southeast Asians who traveled to Iraq and Syria in recent years are fighting in Catholic-majority Philippines. They fear ungoverned areas in the mostly Muslim region around Marawi could make the area a terror hub as in the 1990s.

Then, the Philippines was a base of operations for Al-Qaeda leaders like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi Yousef, who plotted in 1994-95 to blow up airliners over the Pacific. The plot was foiled. But the same men were instrumental in the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Other nations share the fear. Singapore recently warned of IS exerting a radicalizing influence "well beyond" what that of al-Qaida and Jemaah Islamiyah ever mustered. Jemaah Islamiyah carried out major terror attacks around the region in the 2000s. IS already has been linked to attacks in Indonesia and Malaysia, and foiled plots in Singapore, this past year.

This month, Mattis told the region's defense chiefs that "together we must act now to prevent this threat from growing." In Congress this past week, he stressed intelligence sharing and nations like Singapore sharing the burden, rather than deploying US troops. More than 500 US special forces were based in the Mindanao region from 2002 to 2014, advising and training Filipino forces against the Abu Sayyaf, a group notorious for bombings and kidnappings. When it ended, Philippine and US officials voiced concern the US withdrawal "could lead to a resurgence of a renewed terrorist threat," the RAND Corp. later reported. Months before the withdrawal, Abu Sayyaf pledged support to IS.

Supporting the Philippines isn't straightforward in Washington. President Rodrigo Duterte is accused of overlooking and even condoning indiscriminate killings by his forces in a war on drugs. Thousands have died. But that campaign has involved mainly police and anti-narcotic forces, not the military leading the anti-IS fight. Still, the Philippine government is partly to blame for Marawi's violence, said Zachary Abuza, a Southeast Asia expert at the National War College. He said the root cause was the government's failure to fulfill a 2014 peace agreement with the nation's largest Muslim insurgency, which fueled recruitment for IS-inspired groups. — AP

ABE'S SUPPORT SLUMPS AMID DOUBTS ABOUT SCHOOL SCANDAL

TOKYO: Support for Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe slumped more than 10 points to 44.9 percent in a public opinion poll published yesterday, amid opposition party suspicions he used his influence unfairly to help a friend set up a business. Abe has repeatedly denied abusing his authority to benefit his friend. His grip on power is not in danger, given his ruling coalition's huge majority in parliament, but the affair looks unlikely to fade away.

The education ministry unearthed documents last week that the opposition said suggested Abe wanted a new veterinary school run by a friend to be approved in a state-run special economic zone. The ministry had earlier said it could not find the documents but reopened the probe under public pressure. Opposition politicians and the media have identified Abe's friend as Kotaro Kake, the director of the Kake Educational Institution, which wants to open a veterinary department. The government has not approved new veterinary schools for decades because of concern about a glut of veterinarians.

Nearly 85 percent of voters responding to

a Kyodo news agency survey said they did not think the government probe had uncovered the truth of the affair and almost 74 percent were not persuaded by the government's insistence that there was nothing wrong with the approval process. The institution has said it had acted appropriately. Voters were split over last week's enactment of a controversial law that will penalize conspiracies to commit terrorism and other serious crimes, with 42.1 percent in favor and 44 percent against the legislation, Kyodo said.

The government says the new legislation is needed so Japan can ratify a UN treaty aimed at global organized crime and prevent terrorism in the run-up to the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. Opponents say it will allow police to trample on civil liberties by expanding the scope for surveillance. The ruling coalition pushed the law through parliament last week, taking the rare step of skipping a vote in committee and going directly to a full session of parliament's upper house. Almost 68 percent of voters expressed dislike of that rarely used tactic, Kyodo said. — Reuters

TWO PAKISTAN DIPLOMATS MISSING IN AFGHANISTAN

ISLAMABAD: Two Pakistani diplomats based in a consulate office in the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad have been missing since Friday, when they set off by road back to their homeland, Pakistan's foreign office said yesterday. Islamabad did not speculate who may be behind the disappearances but various Afghanistan-based Islamist groups have targeted diplomats in the past. "Pakistan has requested the Afghan Government that all efforts may be made to ensure early recovery of our officials and bring the perpetrators of this heinous crime to justice," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Islamabad said Afghanistan had formed three different investigating groups to probe the incident. Relations between Islamabad and Kabul have been tense in recent years, with both countries

accusing each other of not doing enough to tackle Pakistani and Afghan Taliban militants. Afghanistan has accused Pakistan of turning a blind eye to Afghan Taliban commanders based within its borders and of supporting the militant group, something Islamabad denies.

Islamabad has claimed that Kabul is not doing enough to tackle Pakistani Taliban militants who have been driven out of Pakistan, but who still carry out attacks across the border. Jalalabad, the provincial capital of Nangarhar province, is a busy trading hub about 70 km from the main border crossing with Pakistan, from which landlocked Afghanistan imports much of its goods. The province is home to various Islamist groups, including Pakistani and Afghan Taliban. In recent years the Islamic State has also established a presence Nangarhar. — Reuters

INDONESIA DEPLOYS JETS TO GUARD AGAINST MILITANTS

TARAKAN, Indonesia: Indonesia has deployed Sukhoi fighters at a base in northern Borneo to beef up security in case Islamist militants who overran a town in the Philippines try to flee southwards, an air force colonel told the Antara news agency. The head of the air base in Tarakan, a town in the Indonesian province of North Kalimantan on Borneo, said three Sukhoi jets that arrived on Friday would remain for a month in case radicals fighting the Philippine military in Marawi City sought to escape to Indonesia.

"The militants might flee the Philippines and be forced to cross the border to Indonesia," the Indonesian state news agency cited Colonel Didik Krisyanto as saying. The Philippine military said on Friday that some of the Islamist militants who stormed Marawi City in the south of the country last month may have mingled with evacuees to slip away during the battle that has raged for almost four weeks.

The military says that up to 200 fighters, most of them from local insurgent groups that have pledged allegiance to Islamic State but also some foreign fighters, are holding out, using civilians as human shields and mosques as safe havens. The devastating collapse in security has alarmed neighbors such as Indonesia and Malaysia, and defense and army

chiefs from the three countries are due to meet in Tarakan on Monday for a ceremony to mark the launch of patrols in the seas between the countries.

A port town, Tarakan is just south of the Malaysian side of Borneo and looks out across the sea to Mindanao in the southern Philippines, a sprawling island that has been plagued by insurgencies and banditry for decades. Indonesian naval authorities had also asked local people including fishermen in border areas facing the Philippines to report any suspicious people, Antara reported. A police mobile brigade corp had also been sent to northern areas on Sulawesi island to prevent militants from crossing the border, it said.

Today, Indonesia will inaugurate a maritime command center in Tarakan and also hold a ceremony on an Indonesian warship with Malaysian and Philippine officials to launch patrols. Singapore and Brunei will be attending as observers. The commander of Tarakan's naval base, First Admiral Ferial Fachroni, told Reuters the other countries would also establish command centres to help in the sharing of information. Fachroni said the army, navy and air forces would be involved in patrols but more discussions were needed to pin down whether they would be joint or coordinated. — Reuters



GARDEZ, Afghanistan: Afghan policemen gather at the site of a suicide bombing attack on the police headquarters in the capital of Paktia province yesterday. — AFP

TALEBAN ATTACK KILLS FIVE AFGHAN POLICE, INJURES 18

KABUL: A Taliban suicide bomb and gun attack on a police headquarters in eastern Afghanistan killed at least five officers and injured 18 other people yesterday, authorities said. The attack - part of the Taliban's all-out assault during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan - was launched at 6:00 am and was still continuing more than six hours later, said the regional police commander, Asadullah Shirzad. In addition to the dead, nine police officers and nine civilians were wounded, he said.

The attack involved at least five Taliban, one of whom blew himself up at the entrance to the site in the city of Gardez to clear the way for the others. One was still holding out more than six hours later, said Shirzad, whose base in the city centre houses both regular policemen and police special forces. His description of the attack suggested a well-prepared and coordinated assault. "One (attacker) blew up his vehicle at the entrance of the headquarters, open-

ing the way for two others who opened fire on the security forces. Another suicide bomber was killed," he told AFP.

The head of the police hospital, Dr Shir Mohammad, confirmed the five fatalities. Taleban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the operation in a statement. "Around 6:20 this morning a martyr attack was conducted by our mujahideen against a special forces base in Gardez, Paktia," he wrote. "First a car bomb detonated then our mujahideen entered the building, opening fire on police."

Since they launched their spring offensive in late April, the Taliban have been mounting lethal assaults on positions of the Afghan army and police, who have lost several dozen men in recent weeks. About sixty soldiers were killed on their bases, mostly at night, in the southern province of Kandahar alone around the end of May. The insurgents are also targeting the international coalition supporting Afghan forces. — AFP