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The Return of Abu Sayyaf

By Simon Elegant | Maguindanao Province

The unassuming young man who bought a ticket for Berth 51 on the 1,747-passenger SuperFerry 14 sailing from Manila to Bacolod and Davao on Feb. 26 called himself Arnulfo Alvarado. If security officials in the Philippines checked ferry-passenger lists, they don't, the name would have set off deafening alarm bells. Arnulfo Alvarado, say Philippine officials, was the name of a member, now dead, of the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group. Two other Abu Sayyaf operators have used Alvarado's name to carry out previous attacks, according to Philippine intelligence officers. This Alvarado, whose real name was Redondo Cain Dellosa, hauled on board a cardboard box containing a television set. The TV, according to investigators, was packed with 3.6 kg of TNT. Making his way to the cheapest passenger section in the bowels of the ship, Dellosa carefully placed the box on his seat and slipped away just before the ferry cast off. An hour after its 11 p.m. sailing, just off Corregidor Island, an explosion tore through SuperFerry 14, starting a fire that engulfed the ship and killed a hundred or more passengers (some likely victims are still unaccounted for and may be missing). According to investigators, Dellosa, who was apprehended four weeks later, confessed that the explosion was triggered by a timing device, and that he chose the cheap seats to maximize panic and loss of life.

Responsibility for the attack was immediately claimed by representatives of Abu Sayyaf, a group of Islamic separatists chiefly known for kidnapping for ransom in the southern Philippines. But just as rapidly, officials in Manila scoffed off the claim; President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo dismissed it as coming from "pranksters." Despite promises of a swift investigation into the attack, concrete conclusions about the cause of the explosion have yet to appear.

That's about to change. Officials in Manila say the final results of the forensic investigation should be released within weeks. Says National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales: "Because of the nature of the wreck, half-submerged in the bay, it will be difficult for investigators to prove 100% that it was Abu Sayyaf. But the overwhelming evidence points that way, and I'm certain they were the ones behind the attack." Thus, the SuperFerry 14 bombing will go onto the rolls as the world's fourth deadliest terrorist strike since Sept. 11, 2001, and Asia's worst since the Bali bombings of October 2002.

That conclusion will confirm the fears of regional intelligence officials and terrorism experts that Abu Sayyaf has evolved into a much more ferocious band. A new leadership has abandoned the kidnapping that brought in millions of dollars in ransom. Now, the group is returning to its Islamic roots and is using the familiar weapons of terror—bombing and assassination—in an attempt to achieve an independent Muslim republic in the southern Philippines. Abu Sayyaf already claims to be connected to al-Qaeda. And although regional intelligence officials downplay that assertion, they are worried that Abu Sayyaf could become what it already says it is. National Security Adviser Gonzales describes Abu Sayyaf as "by far the most dangerous group in the country today. And that's something they want to show the world and especially other terrorists who might give them support, like al-Qaeda. They're saying, "Look at us! We're the best. We can help you if you help us.'" According to Zachary Abuza, author of a forthcoming book on Islamic militancy in the southern Philippines, if Abu Sayyaf successfully becomes

the main Islamic radical group in the area, it could become a "magnet for dissatisfaction," attracting hundreds of young Muslims, many of them newly returned from studying in the Middle East.

The group has shown alarming vigor in the past six months. Intelligence officials in Manila say they have intercepted explosives that were to be used in two more attempts to bomb passenger ferries departing from Manila for the southern cities of Zamboanga and Davao. In March, police arrested four Abu Sayyaf members in Manila who allegedly admitted they were preparing to blow up one of the city's busiest shopping malls using up to 36 kg of explosives toted in backpacks. (One of the men picked up was alleged SuperFerry bomber Redondo Cain Dellosa, who apparently spent several days before his arrest boasting to strangers in the capital about his role in the ferry attack in Manila Bay.)

Bombs aren't the only weapons Abu Sayyaf uses. "They are setting up an urban assassination squad called Fisabilillah, or 'The Path of God,'" says Kit Colliers of the Australian National University in Canberra, who has written a detailed report on Islamic militancy and terrorism in the Philippines for the International Crisis Group. Security officials in Manila say half a dozen alleged Abu Sayyaf operatives arrested in June for possession of materials for explosives were members of the squad. "Thank God we got them before the President's inauguration," says outgoing Defense Secretary Eduardo Ermita, referring to Arroyo's swearing in on June 30.

Abu Sayyaf was founded in the 1980s, with the backing of men who were at the heart of al-Qaeda. No less a figure than Osama bin Laden's own brother-in-law, Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, personally arranged initial funding for the group through one of the Islamic charities he operated in the Philippines at the time. But after the death of Abu Sayyaf's founder Abdurajak Janjalani in a firefight with police in August 1998, its religious and political goals were dropped in favor of kidnapping for ransom. The group was paid millions of dollars by the governments of Malaysia, Libya, Germany and France to release hostages seized from a Malaysian diving resort in April 2000. In 2001, Abu Sayyaf kidnapped three Americans and 17 Filipinos from a resort in the Philippines; two of the American hostages and one Filipino died.

Why has it changed its spots yet again? Ironically, the Philippine authorities may have been a victim of their own success. Security officials say that after a concerted drive against the group—[heavily backed by Washington](#) in what was called its "second front" in the war on terror—[scores of senior Abu Sayyaf leaders have been killed or arrested in the past year](#). Most notable was the capture in December 2003 of Ghalib Andang—[a.k.a. Commander Robot](#)—[infamous for his sneering viciousness during the 2000 hostage taking](#). His arrest and the death of key supporters in the group opened the way for an internal coup by another Abu Sayyaf leader, Khadaffy Janjalani, who is the younger brother of Abu Sayyaf's founder and is a veteran of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. In a radio interview, Khadaffy said he aimed to return the fighters to the original goal of independence. Senior Philippine intelligence officials say they believe that as part of his reconsolidation of the group, Khadaffy and a core band of supporters have left the traditional Abu Sayyaf stomping grounds in the Sulu archipelago and Basilan and moved onto the main southern island of Mindanao, the vast home turf of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (M.I.L.F.), the much larger separatist group engaged in on-again, off-again peace talks with the Philippine government. ([See story.](#)) Arroyo is anxious to get a peace deal with the M.I.L.F. to bring stability and development to Mindanao. M.I.L.F. chairman Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim says a deal is needed quickly before younger Muslims in the region succumb to the greater radicalism of Abu Sayyaf

and Jemaah Islamiah, the regional network blamed for the Bali bombings that killed some 200 people, and which is widely believed to have maintained training camps in Mindanao since the late 1990s. "Once they see some hope," Murad told Time in an exclusive interview, "then they will think twice before joining groups that advocate suicide bombing and so on. But when they believe there is no future, then they will go with these groups." Leaders of the Abu Sayyaf, for their part, think that if the M.I.L.F. makes peace with the government, Abu Sayyaf will inherit the region's firebrands. Says a top Abu Sayyaf leader: "If this sell-out succeeds, more blood will flow because the young are more determined jihadis. We will soon find out there are more Osama bin Ladens in our midst." It's becoming a race in Mindanao: between the prospect of peace and Abu Sayyaf's new dedication to terror.

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