



## A man and a plan in war-torn Philippines

By David Gorman

*This Opinion piece was first published in the Asia Times on 1 November 2007.*

SULU, Philippines - The newly elected governor of the violence-ridden southern Philippine province of Sulu has launched a brave new initiative to clear the island domain of guns and goons. Abdusukar Tan's plan to ban the possession of guns in one of the most heavily armed regions of the Philippines is a daring move in a country where politics, though vibrantly democratic, is mired in factional and clan violence fueled by the unrestricted access to heavy weaponry.

The small island province of Sulu is mostly known as a front in the United States-led "war on terror", and is known to harbor some of Southeast Asia's most wanted extremists, including at least one of those responsible for the 2002 Bali bombing in Indonesia.

However, beyond the headlines, a larger problem persists on the island that helps explain why after several years of US military-backed operations, terrorist suspects are able to elude capture, and the province continues to serve as a breeding ground for extremists and remains mired in poverty and insecurity.

The similarities with Iraq and Afghanistan are telling. For an island with a population of only 750,000, as many as 100,000 illegal firearms are in circulation on Sulu. Obtaining a heavy weapon, grenade or mortar is as easy as going to the market. In fact, that's precisely what one does. There are more guns on Sulu than any other province in the already heavily armed Philippines. Not surprisingly, according to the provincial government, the main cause of mortality on the island is from gun shot wounds.

Most of these weapons are carried by civilians and many of them work in the service of local political clans. Aside from the presence of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), with which the government has a peace agreement, and the small number of terrorists enlisted to the Abu Sayyaf Group, so-called civilian voluntary organizations (CVOs) comprise the largest number of armed civilians.

More numerous and often better-armed than the police and the military, the CVOs were established initially under the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos to combat separatism and provide local security for communities. However, they have now gone well beyond their original mandate and are implicitly undermining the legitimacy of the state and fostering insecurity.

In such a sea of weapons and armed groups, the military often do not know who is friend, foe or innocent civilian and is often drawn into clan conflicts while searching for extremists. Fortunately, now there is hope that Sulu could start to throw off its bleak history of armed violence. Under governor Tan's leadership, the local government has become the first province in the Philippines to pass resolutions aimed at both banning weapons and disbanding private armed groups, including CVOs.

## **Little law, less order**

Clearly there is no better place to initiate such a program - nor is there a more difficult place in the Philippines to enforce and implement a gun ban. Sulu has only one judge and one prosecuting attorney for the whole island. The judge only comes to the province two days a month. The police are poorly resourced, heavily outgunned and many fall under the patronage of the local politicians who support the CVOs.

Meanwhile, the military is preoccupied with pursuing the Abu Sayyaf Group as well as keeping an eye on heavily armed MNLF fighters. There's also a problem for the governor, who currently controls the largest number of CVOs. He will now need to take the politically and potentially dangerous step of not only disbanding his own civilian militia but also persuading the mayors, congressman and other political leaders to disband theirs.

Costly in political terms as this move may be, there is a growing realization that if Sulu fails soon to curb the proliferation of weapons and private armed groups, it will continue to breed extremism, insecurity and remain at the bottom of almost every social and economic indicator in the country. As Tan recently put it: "We have no choice."

As a businessman with significant investments on Sulu, Tan knows first-hand that the province is not going to attract economic growth promoting investment without an improvement in the security climate. Guns are a big part of the economic problem. It is a sad fact that a family in Sulu that today earns well below the US\$1,060 average yearly income for a Filipino family, regards a \$600 investment on a heavy assault weapon as far more crucial for the survival of the family than investing that money in their child's education, the family farm or a new house.

So far local political leaders on Sulu as well as the ceasefire MNLF appear prepared to support the gun ban initiative, as they also realize the violence must be tackled if there is to be durable peace and economic development. It's an initiative that should be watched closely as it could establish a blueprint for limiting the spread of weapons to civilians, which in turn encourages the formation of private armed groups.

Tan's initiative is a bold one, for local militias are widely seen as a surefire way to ensure stability and political continuity; in fact, as the current reality on Sulu demonstrates, they clearly instead sow the seeds of long-term instability.

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