

## Information Operations (IO) as a Tool of Stabilization Operations in Counter-Terrorism

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and to relate the efforts of the Philippine government in utilizing information operations (IO) as a tool for stabilization and post-conflict support operations. Two case studies of IO for counter-terrorism will be discussed to highlight specific capabilities as core strength of the IO campaign. The first is the Punitive Actions Campaign conducted in May 2003. The second is an innovative civil affairs project dubbed as Development for Peace in Sulu. It is a best practice study and must not be treated as an official government position.

Terrorism's impact, whether on the economy, peace and order and civilian lives, is enormous. Its effect spills over in civilian communities and metropolitan centers. Media reportage on terrorism in the Philippines is often exaggerated and sensationalized, negatively affecting current and future economic and social investments. Anti-terror wars, on the other hand, are very costly. According to a study, "it costs around 30 million pesos (37,000 dollars) a day to fund military operations on the island of Mindanao where most terror groups operate."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there are valuable things, which cannot be quantified - lives, futures and relationships, especially between the government and its people due to fear propagated by terrorism. Thus, stabilization operations or the post conflict phase is very crucial in counter-terror operations.

## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The Philippines is located in Southeast Asia and is one of the founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is an archipelago of 7,107 islands and is home to 86 million people of 200 plus ethno-linguistic groups and speaking more 70 dialects. Significantly, it has 12 million overseas workers remitting US\$10M annually to the country through families. Basically, the country has an agricultural base, with a growing manufacturing and booming service sector. It is a republican state and has a democratic form of government.

## THREAT SITUATION / TERRORISM

The Philippines is both a young nation and an emerging democracy. This democracy is challenged by various threats, and the more potent and enduring one is its problem of insurgency. Insurgency poses a threat to the country's peace and progress. There are three basic national internal security concerns, namely, the communist terrorists (CT), the Southern Philippines Secessionist Group (SPSG) and the Abu Sayyaf Group.

The Communist Terrorist Movement (CTM) consists of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the New People's Army (NPA) and the National Democratic Front (NDF). The CTM aims to expand and intensify the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal and anti-fascist struggle; extend the guerilla fronts to the majority of the municipalities; uphold the leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Arguillas, Carolyn, "The Cost of War," Mindanews, March 26, 2003.

of the party over the NPA and the armed revolution; and strengthen the party ideologically, politically and organizationally. In the late 1980's, due to a successful military campaign and the inherent struggle within the weakening CTM leadership, the communist group splintered into 17 factions. Nonetheless, because of its nationwide scope and entrenched propaganda machinery, it is considered the primary internal security concern of the government.

The Southern Philippine Secessionist Group (SPSG), as a threat group, is a term used to refer to the secessionists in Mindanao. It included the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which has settled peace with government in 1995 during the time of President Fidel V. Ramos (1992-1998). This was one of the outstanding achievements of the said Administration. Currently, SPSG refers to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a breakaway group from the MNLF. Its late Chairman, AL HAJ MURAD committed to pursue a peaceful resolution to Mindanao. According to him, "GRP-MILF Peace Talks is the only practical, civilized and diplomatic option left in lieu of an escalation of the fighting, in achieving a comprehensive political settlement of the century old Bangsamoro problem."

Like the CTM, the MILF is also a divided organization with several guerilla groups and political factions. These guerilla groups and political factions consider MILF as an umbrella organization only when it is convenient and favorable to their own respective interests. However, each guerilla group has its own self-professed autonomy to operate on its own and the MILF leadership has time and again washed its hands on the activities of erring guerilla groups.

Currently, some guerilla groups are engaged in extortion activities to sustain MILF operations. Others are allegedly linked with Pentagon KFRG (kidnap-for-ransom-gang) that utilizes poor remote municipalities as staging areas. The most disturbing of all is that MILF elements establish linkage with CPP/NPA, ASG and JI personalities. The third threat group, which is considered the smallest group but the most alarming one because it has been branded as international terrorist organization is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

## **GOVERNMENT RESPONSE**

It was an early realization for the newly installed Gloria Macapagal Arroyo Government in 2001 that the solution to a complex problem such as insurgency seldom depends in the capability of just one agency. Hence, the President issued EXECUTIVE ORDER NR. 21 S-2001 providing for a coordinative and integrative system on internal security. It mandates the formulation of the National Internal Security Plan (NISP) and espouses that the Priority National Security Objective is the resolution of the internal armed conflict.

“ The resolution of the internal armed conflict is the priority national security objective of this administration in promoting peace.”

The grand strategy as stated in the NISP is called the STRATEGY OF HOLISTIC APPROACH because it addresses the problem as a whole and is comprehensive in scope. It has the following BROAD OBJECTIVES: a) Decisively defeat main armed groups; b) Dismantle Politico-Military infrastructures of the threat; c) Defend communities, protect the people and secure vital installations; d) Reestablish government control and authority in contested areas; e) Significantly reduce the root causes of insurgency; f) Isolate insurgents

and deny them personnel, Intelligence, materiel and psychological support; and g) Win the trust and confidence, and the respect of the people.

The components of the approach include the following:

1. Political / Legal / Diplomatic actions.
2. Information.
3. Economic / Psychological.
4. Security / Peace and Order.

Interagency Coordination and Integration is a strategic management process that binds all of these components together. Interagency coordination forges the vital link among the political, legal, Diplomatic, Information, Socio-Economic, Psychosocial, Security, and Peace & Order entities of the government. Interagency coordination coupled with information operations works together in harnessing the potential of these components to bear impact on the aforementioned broad objectives toward the national goal of resolving the internal armed conflict through the use of resources and power of the government bureaucracy, with assistance from other peace stakeholders in the community.

### **INFORMATION OPERATIONS AS STABILIZATION TOOL**

Information cuts across other components of government response. Overall, effort to advocate peace, promote public confidence in government and support government efforts is through the following: a) Tri-media and interpersonal approach; b) Formulation and implementation of strategies to physically and psychologically isolate the insurgents from the population; c) Employment of psychological actions, themes and messages directed to insurgents. The lead convenor for Information is Office of the Press Secretary. Members include the Departments of National Defense, Interior and Local Government, Education, and Social Welfare and Development, National Security Council and National Anti-Poverty Commission.

The Information Response Sub-Committee has adopted IO as its main strategy for the Information Component. It considers IO as both peacetime and wartime tool. IO at the strategic level is a deliberate and systematic process of harnessing the full potential of information and related capabilities / activities to shape the environment and influence decision-making to achieve national defense and security goals. It is supported by Strategic Communications from the defense institution and Social Marketing from the civilian agencies.

The main effort at the operational level is AFP Information Operations. This consists of actions taken to affect friendly, neutral and adversary / threat information and information systems while protecting one's own information and information systems to achieve military objectives. The purpose of operational IO is to support the commander in the battlefield – win parallel battlefields combat and psychological war. The focus of IO is perception and attitudes of decision makers or groups (friendly, enemy and neutral). The electromagnetic

spectrum, information systems and information that supports decision makers command and control the automated responses. IO Targets the human factor as its Ultimate Objective. This refers to the Decision Maker or anybody that can influence and Adversary, ally or civilians or another target depending on the level of operations.

As a tool of stabilization operations, IO is designed to preface the environment – influence the political, economic environment – even before the campaign begun. It works to minimize casualties / loss / disruption of community life in order to achieve objectives soonest or in rapid conclusion. Its ultimate goal is to WIN THE WAR AND WIN THE PEACE. In all of these things, IO shall endeavor to do good and to tell it well before, during and after operations.

In sum, the information operations (IO) support to the punitive actions campaign enhanced not only military-police operations but also the entire government response to terrorism in Central Mindanao and Sulu. In Central Mindanao, it set the record straight on the real terrorists in the country. In Sulu, the military now is seen as a bringer of health, education and peace rather than bringer of wars and conflict, which was its former tag.

IO harnessed the full potential of information to link stakeholders effectively and efficiently towards mission accomplishment. The overall effort made stabilization and the post-conflict phase a meaningful endeavor to the government and the public that it serves.

To further enhance the points raised in this paper, it will discuss two Case Studies where government employed IO as a stabilization tool. The first is Punitive Actions, where government implemented IO to support OPLAN ENDURING PEACE, which aimed to address embedded terrorist cells in insurgent groups. The core element of case #1 IO campaign is public affairs. The second case is the Development for Peace in Sulu and its core element is civil affairs.

### **CASE NO. 1: PUNITIVE ACTIONS AGAINST TERRORIST CELLS IN MINDANAO**

In March and April of 2003, a series of bombings were launched in Mindanao by terror cells embedded in the secessionist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). These included the terror attacks in Davao City Wharf; a community celebrating fiesta in Siocon, Zamboanga del Norte; a marketplace in Maigo; schoolrooms in Munai, Lanao del Norte; and communities in Koronadal, Cotabato. The government leadership, through a decision of the Cabinet Oversight Committee on Internal Security (COCIS), decided to conduct punitive actions against terror cells involved in the attacks.

The punitive actions campaign consisted of police operations, military pursuit operations, legal actions, relief / rehabilitation / community preparedness for communities affected and information operations (IO). The information operations plan was dubbed OPLAN ENDURING PEACE and was launched simultaneously with the police-military operations to shape the information environment in support of the campaign. Specific objectives included the following.

1. Maintain positive local, regional and international perceptions of the military / police operations.
2. Demonstrate a strong GRP commitment and community involvement in fighting terrorism.
3. Translate tactical successes to psychological victories.
4. Engage interagency partners and enhance linkages with identified stakeholders.

A central IO Fusion Cell was set-up at the headquarters of the Southern Command in Zamboanga City and satellite IO cells were collocated with the Infantry Divisions covering the three provinces affected by the terror attacks, namely Iligan, Cotabato and Cagayan de Oro Cities. The central IO cell was linked to the national level and led by the Office of the Press Secretary. Together, they ensured that government forces live up with the IO principle and battlecry of “Doing Good and Telling it Well.” The campaign theme in the government response to terrorism is a comprehensive effort that was planned and executed to protect the community against terrors and assure them that government forces are doing their job and justice will be served.

The information support to Punitive Actions in Mindanao provided the “real time” base for Philippine information operations, guided by the principle of “doing good and telling it well.” The IO team headed by the Philippine Government’s Office of the Press Secretary involved the synchronization of operations and information / communication support, side by side with military pursuit operations against terrorist groups and community preparedness activities.

The government agency in charge of social welfare and development, the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), assisted the effort through community preparedness by planning for population control and refugee operations as well as counseling and rehabilitation of Child Combatants who surrendered to government forces.

Philippine law enforcement agencies contributed to the overall effort by developing special legal teams to support expedient arrests, searches and seizures.

Public information components from the Departments of Defense, Justice and the Office of the Press Secretary kept the entire bureaucracy and the nation abreast of operations in Mindanao because the operations to run after terrorist groups had been announced by the President herself. Thus, the media and the public were aware of daily actions by their government.

Below is a summary outline of the Mindanao Punitive Operations: OPLAN ENDURING PEACE Information Campaign Plan.

#### *PURPOSE*

*To synchronize and sustain the integrated use of assigned/supporting IO capabilities (Public Information/ Affairs, Civil Military Operations, Intelligence, and other Staff Function) to shape an information environment to successfully achieve the objectives of the battle Group.*

## *VISION*

*Provide comprehensive and centralized IO planning and operational support to the government's overall effort to address the terrorist threats in Mindanao.*

## *MISSION*

- *Establish and sustain unity and credibility of government information efforts*
- *Proactively promote positive perceptions of the government security efforts while minimizing detractor/adversarial misinformation/disinformation.*
- *To conduct IO in support to the accomplishment of the Southern Command (SouthCom), Armed Forces of the Philippines' mission.*

## *OBJECTIVES*

### *General*

*To shape the information environment in support to Philippine President Arroyo's policy pronouncement.*

### *Specific*

- *To increase public awareness and support to the Mil ops against the MILF.*
- *To enhance linkaging.*
- *To enhance PA and CA capabilities.*

## *TARGET AUDIENCE*

- *General Public.*
- *National/Local Government leadership/Decision makers.*
- *Own troops.*
- *Religious sector.*
- *International/national/local media practitioners.*
- *OIC/Regional/International community.*
- *Enemy leadership/personnel/mass base.*
- *Relatives and friends of enemy forces.*

## *ACTIONS PRIOR TO OFFICIAL PRESIDENTIAL ANNOUNCEMENT*

- I. *Set-up IO Fusion Cells collocated at the Campaign Commander's HQs (SouthCom) and satellite IO Fusion Cells at Force Commanders' HQs at the Philippine Army's 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (ID) and 6<sup>th</sup> ID.*
- II. *Operationalize Media Operation Centers at SouthCom Headquarters, 4<sup>th</sup> ID, and 6<sup>th</sup> ID.*
- III. *Preface the information environment.*

## *ACTIVITIES PRIOR TO MILITARY OPERATIONS*

- a) *Public Affairs.*  
*Proactive information campaign exploiting the following:*

- *Atrocities committed by the MILF.*
- *Political implication on the peace process.*
- *Issues that will give mission legitimacy.*

b) *Civil Affairs.*

- *Preparation of displaced civilian evacuation point.*
- *Establish linkages with Peace and Order Councils (POCs), Regional Disaster Coordinating Councils (RDCCs).*

### *ACTIVITIES DURING MILITARY OPERATIONS*

a) *Public Affairs.*

*Sustain proactive info campaign exploiting the following:*

- *First hand media updates on operation results.*
- *Justify operations as a means to restore peace & order in the area.*
- *Other issues that will give mission legitimacy.*

b) *Civil Affairs.*

- *Facilitate delivery of goods and services to evacuation points.*
- *Facilitate knowledge-based activities for displaced civilians.*
- *Identify relatives of enemy forces for exploitation.*

### *ACTIVITIES*

a) *Public Affairs.*

*Sustain proactive info campaign exploiting the following:*

- *First hand Media Updates on operation results.*
- *Drumbeat restoration of peace & order as result of military operations.*
- *Other issues that will justify mission legitimacy.*

b) *Civil Affairs*

- *Facilitate restoration/rehabilitation of affected communities.*
- *Facilitate orderly return of displaced civilians to their communities.*
- *Maintain liaison with POCs, RDCCs*

### *STRATEGIC PLAN*

- *The Office of the Press Secretary (OPS), together with the DND-AFP, DILG-PNP, DSWD and DOH Public Information Offices developed a Strategic IO plan that will govern the information campaign.*
- *Supported by an effective and efficient Information and Communication Technology (ICT), it integrates the roles of the Armed Forces of the Philippines' PA, CMO, and Intelligence with that of other government line agencies involved.*

### *PEOPLE*

- > *IO Fusion Cells called Public Information Bureaus (PIBs)*

- > *Each PIB has a staff complement composed of:*
  - *Spokespersons from the military.*
  - *Spokespersons from civilian line agencies.*
  - *IO integrators.*
  - *Writers/researchers.*
  - *Cameraman.*
  - *Public affairs officer.*
  - *Psychological operations officer.*
  - *Intelligence officer.*
  - *Civil affairs officer.*
  - *Social welfare and development officer (DSWD).*
  - *Community relations officer (DILG-PNP).*
  
- > *The PA Officer manages the Media Operation Center (MOC).*

### *PROCESS*

- > *PIB's follow daily battle rhythms synchronized with national level activities.*
  - *0900H: Daily IO Cell/PIB interagency meetings.*
  - *1100H: Submission of talking points to COC-IS*  
*Daily press release.*
  - *1400H: Daily strategic press briefings in Malacañang Palace.*
  - *1500H: Daily briefback/reachback.*

In terms of day-to-day operations, the IO network followed a coordinated and synchronized schedule of operations, press conferences and daily interagency planning and evaluation meetings that is observed from the Office of the Presidential Spokesperson in Malacañang down to the Civil Relations Groups in the field. The integrator coordinates the synchronization of the activities. Policies, plans and directions were formulated and issued from the strategic level while operations were coordinated at the operational level and executed at the tactical levels. Activities were supported at the strategic level by the national leadership. Hence, impact at all levels was delivered well.

After a week of the punitive actions campaign, the MILF declared a UNILATERAL SOMO (Suspension of Military Operations) urging the government to commit to a ceasefire and go back to peace negotiating table. The isolation of terror cells (and supporters from the MILF) from the people through real-time media reportage, the immediate rectification of allegations of increasing number of evacuees and accusations of human rights violations against the military, were among the significant results of the IO campaign. Civilians reported reporters embedded in military – police units saw how escaping terror groups burn houses / schoolrooms to distract pursuing troops. Moreover, the government was able to successfully demonstrate a holistic approach with full force with civilian agencies and not the military on the lead against counter-terror efforts.

The information operations campaign lasted for two weeks. The first week was the more active part, while the second week was a follow up / follow through of the results of the operation and its expected impact. The MILF leadership's issuance of a SOMO is a good measure of effectiveness (MOE) of the IO campaign. Furthermore, it reinforced the government's determination and eventually caused the MILF to issue a complete cessation of

hostilities, instead of a temporary declaration. It also emphasized that the punitive actions campaign is NOT an all-out war against the MILF, but against terrorist groups. The indirect message is for insurgent groups such as MILF to denounce terrorism and violence, and to pursue peace through non-violent means.

The overall result of the campaign included the capture of notorious terror cell leaders, surrender of hundreds of MILF guerillas who included CHILD SOLDIERS, recovery of hundreds of firearms, filing of criminal cases against terror perpetrators and enhanced interagency coordination.

## **CASE NO. 2: DEVELOPMENT FOR PEACE IN SULU PROJECT BY THE ASIA PACIFIC INITIATIVE**

The Development for Peace in Sulu (DPIS) Project is intended to address the root causes of terrorism in the province, which used to be a sanctuary for the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a terror group engaged in kidnapping, extortion and other crimes. After the military operations, DPIS as a focus effort was implemented in Sulu and is still on going. It has helped promote civilian-military-police cooperation that has boosted the law and order campaign. Law and order provides for the foundation for initiation and pursuit of development initiatives, which helps sustain the delicate peace in the area. Development is currently pursued in strides and the IO campaign focuses on denying safe haven to terrorists, while rebuilding communities and restoring the trust and confidence between the government and the citizenry.

Overall, the Development for Peace in Sulu (DPIS) is a Civil Affairs effort with a primary focus on saving children and young people at risk of influence and recruitment by lawless elements like the ASG. Majority of the children of Sulu, whether in Jolo, which is an urban center, or the outskirts come from poor families. Before, due to the very low literacy rate of parents, children were usually not encouraged to go to school. They were asked to help in the farms or other livelihood activities to help augment the family income. Given the presence of lawless elements in the area, there is a very real threat of child recruitment for “easy money”. The lure of the peso by lawless elements means different things to many: to help improve the conditions of the family, improve the individual’s status and even raise hope of “someday going to school if [they] can save enough.” There are stories of children who have actually been involved as accessories to lawlessness not for ideology or the lure of “gun power” but to earn some money for the family and possibly save for the future.

This situation, however, is changing. With the recent developments in the island, more and more people are looking at education as a means to improve their quality of life. It is still a difficult campaign to keep the children in school because employment is also scarce and the lure of easy money is present. However, the seeds of hope in education are present and just need nurturing. DPIS serves to provide the catalyst or fertilizer to nurture these seeds of hope.

The broad objectives of DPIS are the following: a) Improve the socio-economic conditions in the community as an investment to sustainable development; and b) improve “political” environment through military-community cooperation leading to sustainable security.

For its methodology, DPIS focuses on benefits to the children of Sulu as the means to obtain full support and cooperation of the community. The primary objective is to improve educational environment through efforts such as upgrading classroom facilities and improving sanitation conditions. Efforts such as providing de-worming medicines for elementary schools and upgrading medical equipment in school clinics go a long, long way in re-building trust and confidence between the people and government / civil society, who are considered outsiders from Sulu.

DPIS, with the help of the Department of National Defense (DND) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines, brings education and medical assistance to the people of Sulu to augment the provision of basic services in the area. The DND-AFP provided transportation, manpower and security for the International and Non-Governmental Organizations and donated goods to the people of Sulu.

Educational assistance comprised equipment (generators, computers and air conditioners), facilities (tables, chair, boards) and school supplies (instructor and student materials). DPIS also helped in providing assistance to the schools. Pilot schools were chosen for the project with the objective of making them model schools for the project. Future plans include expansion to schools on the outskirts of Jolo City once conditions in the pilot schools have improved. However, good works are their own advertisement.

An important priority of DPIS is the improvement of Mindanao State University College and High School through: Upgrading computer education facilities and instruction; Provision of internet and encouraging research and correspondence to the rest of the country and the world; Developing MSU College Computer Laboratory as a center of computer education in Jolo by offering basic computer courses courtesy of DND-AFP and other partners; Energizing the student population by empowering the student council / teachers and staff through motivation and continuing education seminars; and improving school library through the provision of books and other materials / classroom facilities.

Medical assistance consists of the provision of diagnostic and laboratory equipment. DPIS donors provided the Integrated Provincial Health Office with much needed supplies. Health workers from the IPHO are able to reach out to the communities outside Sulu, especially remote municipalities and barangays.

According to the November 4, 2002 Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Philippines and the American Foreign Policy Council's Asia Pacific Initiative signed at the Philippines Embassy in Washington, D.C. by Ambassador Albert del Rosario and Al Santoli, AFPC-API is the coordinator of the three-year humanitarian and economic development project. The consortium of private health and education-oriented foundations and individuals that supported API included the William H. Donner Foundation, the National Geographic Education Foundation, Sabre [education] Foundation, the Washington, D.C. Masons and the American Muslim Women Coalition. Private companies that provided generous in-kind donations of medical supplies include MedPharm, the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor and Hi-Tech X-ray, while the Xybernaut Corporation donated computer equipment. The Philippines Department of National Defense and the Philippines Airline Foundation provided transportation and logistical support.

The DPIS project is unique in its hands-on working relationship with the grassroots Muslim community. Throughout its two-year implementation, it has engaged the active

participation of the local education and health professionals, religious leaders, former combatants, parents and the military in the area, both the Philippine Army and the Marines.

Civil affairs as the core element of the IO campaign proved to be an effective stabilization tool because it has provided the base to improve community-support for the military and the police in carrying out their respective missions in ridding the island of terrorist elements. The mistrust that exists between the people and the military is slowly replaced by confidence and trust is building up as the project provides situation that demonstrates the community leaders working with the military. Civilian authorities are now more confident to avail of the services of the military so they can carry out their duties (e.g., health personnel, teachers). People welcome military presence, a move that is important in drawing cooperation for purposes of sustaining peace.

## **SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION**

As far as the Philippine practice and context is concerned, Information Operations (IO) as a tool for stabilization can be employed at the strategic operational and tactical levels. IO as a stabilization tool must be integrated early on through IO Planning and carried out, followed through and evaluated at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. Employment of IO depends on the mission, information environment, targets, operational levels, Participants, capabilities and related activities. The key is coordination, integration and synchronization or people working together as one team, with one mission. It not about going hi-tech as some perceived it to be because it needs to be adapted to the local environment and scenarios.

As a result of the two case studies, this paper concludes and shall make recommendations to the Information Response Sub-Committee that existing national policies can and should adopt IO as stabilization tool in both insurgency / counter-terror campaigns. The process of development is still co-evolution. Information operations staff from the military and communication strategists from the civilian sector can engage in planning and executing information operations (IO) programs armed with the lessons they learned from the past and evolve a Filipino IO doctrine that is effective and responsive to the Filipino culture, operational context and information environment. Since conflicting messages and signals are destabilizing, IO helps stabilize the information environment, which influences the operational, social, economic and political environment. Government should come out as one team with one voice and plans are carried out with the guiding principle “doing good and telling it well.”