



The Bigger Casualty by a concerned Filipino*

I woke up burdened with the disappointing news that the Philippines will pull its troops from Iraq in a bid to guarantee Angelo de la Cruz's release by his barbaric captors. I'm disappointed, even though, like all Filipinos, my greatest hope is that de la Cruz will emerge "unscathed" from his undeserved ordeal.

The Philippine government, has reportedly clarified that there is no official word on the troop pull out, and that the "higher authorities" did not clear Undersecretary Rafael Seguis' statement. I theorized the move was an effort to buy time, and the undersecretary's statement on al Jazeera television seemed like a desperate attempt to communicate with the hostage takers, with whom the Philippine government momentarily lost contact as the deadline for the troops' withdrawal was expiring.

I can only hope this was the scenario behind the announcement that "the Philippines will pull its troops out of Iraq swiftly." I know neither the actual situation nor the undersecretary's mind and negotiating style to come up with a more definitive reading. My guess is based on the observable circumstances, noting the undersecretary's unusual decision to appear on al Jazeera and make a critical announcement without the "go signal" from home.

The critical situation facing the Manila government now is the same situation the government of the Republic of Korea faced several weeks ago. In June, the world reeled in horror at the beheading of Kim Sun-II, a South Korean translator who was also kidnapped in an attempt to force South Korea to withdraw its troops from Iraq. Unlike the Philippines, however, South Korea held its ground and never gave in to the demands of the terrorists, even at the cost of the life of one of its citizens. The South Koreans lost Kim Sun-II, but they retained their collective dignity and strength as a nation.

I say categorically that any decision of our government to pull troops from Iraq is a strategic blunder that will do the country, and Filipinos, more harm than good in the long-term. I say this in the context of our greater security interests – one that demands solid resistance against the increasing threat of terrorism within our own backyard, and at the same time calls for protection of our nationals working in conflict areas overseas.

Granting that the Philippine government's decision to send troops to Iraq was an executive faux pas, we cannot change the fact that our troops are already there and that pulling them out at the dictates of terrorists paves the way for a domino effect that will eventually haunt us everywhere. Our country's policy is not to negotiate with terrorists. Unfortunately, we had to, and we just did, because a Filipino's life is on the line. Unfortunately, other terrorists are watching,

and our government's actions have revealed to them our country's Achilles' heel.

It is important to point out, however, that the Philippine government is capitulating to the terrorists' demands, not because it is the best decision to make, but because it cannot swim against the tide of public opinion. Here one should distinguish between national interest from the public perspective and national interest from the supposed-to-be realist point of view of any government.

The case of Angelo de la Cruz should therefore be a cause for reflection not only for the Philippine government, but more importantly for the Filipino people. Terrorism is a psychological game that feeds on vulnerabilities of both the state and the people. The terrorists are using our own people to limit the affairs of government by playing on the emotions of the public and exploiting the greed and thirst for stories that sell in the media. Their understanding of the public's sentiment and the power of the media gives terrorists a chance to manipulate not just the Philippine government, but, more importantly, the Filipino people.

The country's relative success in maintaining a "no-negotiation, no-ransom" policy with the Abu Sayyaf in the 2000 hostage takings in Basilan was aided by the bandits' inability to sow widespread fear by exploiting the media, especially television. This is no longer the case, thanks to al Jazeera and the international media.

The other factor that makes it difficult for the Philippine government to maintain decisive resistance against the demands of Iraqi terrorists is its own political vulnerability. We have an administration that is either incapable of or unwilling to make unpopular decisions, especially when its energies are devoted to winning a greater mandate and legitimacy.

As more people blame the Philippine government, it becomes increasingly likely that our government will give in to public pressure. But what the government fails to see is that doing so doesn't end the blame game; nor does it ensure that this crisis will not reoccur. The government's misery could end with the release of Angelo de la Cruz in the short-term, but it will be tested in the future when the cost of capitulating to terrorists become apparent.

If the government is truly convinced that our deployment of troops in Iraq is aimed at promoting our greater national interest, then it should stand by its decision even if it means costly sacrifices. Our leadership should elevate the cause of our troop deployment in Iraq from a symbolic commitment to the U.S. objective to a more meaningful contribution to the global quest against tyranny and terrorism. Given the millions of Filipino nationals in different parts of the world, especially

in the Middle East, we have the responsibility to help secure the world for the sake of our own people.

The Philippine government said it was “willing to pay the price” when it announced the country’s decision to join the “coalition of the willing” in Iraq. Any decision to pull the troops now will damage the credibility of the Philippines, and make Filipinos easy prey to terrorists and insurgents both at home and abroad. Should the Philippines opt for troop withdrawal, I only hope the Filipino people are as ready as the Philippine government to pay this price.

We Filipinos should realize that our government is our own reflection. The government’s decision is a revelation about its own people. Its humiliation is our humiliation. Its mistakes, our mistakes... We can blame our leaders up to a certain point, but we will always have to suffer the consequences of our own decisions.

** A Filipino colleague’s personal view on the withdrawal of Philippine troops from Iraq. For personal reasons, this individual does not wish to be identified.*