

Filipino Muslim militants kidnap two

REUTERS, Manila

Muslim militants abducted a bakery owner and her son on a remote southern Philippines island, a police official said yesterday, warning of a possible resurgence of kidnappings by notorious rebel group Abu Sayyaf.

The Philippines military, with help from the United States, has spent the past year combing the remote island of Jolo for members of Abu Sayyaf, who work and train with Jemaah Islamiah, Al Qaeda's franchise in Asia.

"We have reasons to suspect the Abu Sayyaf group was behind the latest kidnapping on Jolo island," Ahirum Ajirum, the police chief in Sulu province, told reporters, a day after masked gunmen took away the mother and son who owned a bakery and a pawnshop.

"We heard the gunmen were demanding at least 10 million pesos in exchange for the freedom of Jacklyn and Jeffrey Silbin."

Ajirum said it was the second case of kidnap-for-ransom of local traders on Jolo this year.

The last high-profile abduction of foreign and local tourists in the south happened in May 2001, when Abu Sayyaf beheaded one of three American tourists.

Lieutenant-General Gabriel Habacon, the military commander in the southern Philippines, was more cautious in blaming the Muslim militants for the latest kidnapping.

"We could be seeing a local armed group raising money either for political or cultural purposes," Habacon told reporters in Zamboanga City, a commercial hub in southwestern Philippines.

"We believed the Abu Sayyaf would be going for high-profile targets and stage more spectacular attacks, such as bombings and raids on tourist resorts."



PHOTO: STAR

Local people stage a demonstration at Tolarbagh at Mirpur in the city yesterday protesting encroachment of part of a road by an influential person.

As world warms, legal battles loom

REUTERS, Oslo

Heatwaves, droughts and rising seas are likely to spur a spate of hard-to-prove lawsuits in the 21st century as victims seek to blame governments and companies for global warming, experts say.

Pacific islanders might sue to try to prevent their low-lying atolls from vanishing under the waves, African farmers could seek redress for crop failures or owners of ski resorts in the Alps might seek compensation for a lack of snow.

"If the evidence (that humans are warming the globe) hardens up, as it may well do, then it has all the ingredients of the tobacco case," said Myles Allen, of the physics department of the University of Oxford in Britain.

But convincing a judge that a country or a company is liable for a fraction of a global problem caused by greenhouse gases -- the effects of

which are widely disputed -- may be difficult.

"The legal profession is only now penetrating these issues," said Roda Verhaugen, co-director of the Climate Justice group which mainly advises plaintiffs. "There have been no large awards of damages but there are an increasing numbers of cases."

About 40 people in France have died in a heatwave in Europe in the past week with sweltering July temperatures also in the United States and Canada. In 2003, about 15,000 people died in France and 20,000 in Italy in a heatwave.

This July's heat may be part of normal, unpredictable weather but many scientists say it fits a pattern of warming linked to a build-up of heat-trapping carbon dioxide emitted by burning fossil fuels in power plants, factories and cars.

WARMEST YEARS

The 10 warmest years since records began were all since 1990, and scientists who advise the United Nations project that rising temperatures could cause wrenching changes by 2100. Their next report, due in early 2007, will be pored over by legal experts.

David Karoly, professor of meteorology at the University of Oklahoma, said ever more detailed studies since 2001 indicated that human activities

were warming most regions of the world.

The south-east United States and western Asia were exceptions. In parts of Asia, persistent air pollution was apparently blocking some of the sun's rays but it was unclear why southeastern America was escaping the trend, he said.

And some damage could be more easily linked to rising temperatures than others, he said.

"Sea level rise, melting of glaciers and the early flowering of plants are direct responses to higher temperatures," he said. "But other impacts, such as storm damage from hurricanes, are far more controversial."

The United States is the target of most litigation because it produces a quarter of all greenhouse gases. President George W Bush pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, the UN pact meant to limit greenhouse gases.

Bush said Kyoto wrongly omitted poor nations from its first goals for 2012 and would cost US jobs.

Experts say companies complying with all laws in the countries where they operate may still be liable to lawsuits. Firms in the European Union, for instance, are curbing emissions under Kyoto while US firms face no mandatory caps.

Pakistan haunted by Taliban question as Nato deploys

REUTERS, Islamabad

Almost five years after thousands of Taliban fighters fled Afghanistan to escape a US-led invasion, Pakistan is still unable to shake off suspicions that it is allowing them to operate from its soil.

Just as India is losing patience with Pakistan's failure to act more forcefully against numerous anti-Indian Islamic militant groups, Afghanistan, the United States and other Nato powers have been telling Islamabad to get tougher with the Taliban.

"There is little doubt that top Taliban commanders find sanctuary within Pakistan and opportunity to plan and launch operations," Marvin G Weinbaum, a former analyst with the State Department's intelligence bureau, wrote in a study published by the United States Institute of Peace last month.

Islamabad's efforts to check extremism and prevent the infiltration of anti-Afghan regime insurgents are accurately described as inconsistent, incomplete and at times insincere.

The deployment of Nato forces in southern Afghanistan during the worst phase of the Taliban insurgency, with 1,700 killed so far this year, has once again put Pakistan's role under scrutiny.

Whenever President Pervez Musharraf comes under pressure over the Taliban he points to three things; difficult terrain on the long frontier, inadequate attempts to control the insurgency on the Afghan side, and the hundreds of casualties the Pakistan army has suffered since deploying 80,000 troops in the border areas.

Analysts say the points are valid, although casualties have largely resulted from fighting al Qaeda militants in the Waziristan region, while there has been no confrontation with Afghan Taliban fighters further west in Baluchistan. Baluch police said they arrested over 200 Afghan Taliban last week, but analysts are highly sceptical whether many of those detained were fighters, despite diplomatic welcomes given to the crackdown by Afghanistan and Britain.

INTELLIGENCE "ASSETS AND LIABILITIES"

For all Musharraf's pledges to the global war on terrorism, there is an abiding feeling that militants are being left in circulation in order to retain leverage across Pakistan's eastern and western borders.

Despite publicly abandoning the Taliban after al Qaeda's attacks on the United States in 2001, analysts say Pakistani intelligence agencies probably want their options open due to both India's growing friendship with Afghanistan and doubts about the durability of President Hamid Karzai's rule in Kabul.

In his report, Weinbaum alluded to speculation that elements within Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate, or still active retired officers, covertly support the Taliban.

Having already suffered from the backlash of militant Islam thanks to support for the Mujahideen war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, some Pakistanis now fear the country's spymasters are continuing to play a dangerous game.

"The jihadi and Taliban 'assets' have spawned more powerful anti-Pakistan, anti-Musharraf 'liabilities' at home and abroad. If these are not dismantled swiftly and decisively, General Musharraf and Pakistan will plunge into the eye of a storm," the "Friday Times" weekly

Thousands flee Indonesian volcano

REUTERS, Jakarta

More than 3,000 villagers have fled the area around a volcano in eastern Indonesia after it started blasting out hot gas and lava, officials said yesterday.

Saut Simatupang, a senior volcanologist, told Reuters the alert status for Mount Karangetan on Siau island was now at maximum.

"There is a hot gas cloud as far as 2.5 kilometres (1.5 miles) from the southern or southeastern parts of the volcano. Since it (the cloud) is near to villagers' homes we have upgraded it to the top alert status," he said.

The official said there had been no casualties, but the lava flow was only 400 metres (1,300 ft) away from some villagers' homes.

He said that villagers had been evacuating on their own accord at night, but were returning during the day to work.

"The latest situation tends to show a decrease, with the hot gas cloud declining."

Siau lies north of Manado on Sulawesi island, which is 2,200 km (1,365 miles) northeast of the capital Jakarta.

Rustam Pakaya, a senior health ministry official in Jakarta, said there were four villages threatened by the volcano.

concluded in its latest editorial. IF YOU CAN'T BEAT THEM, TALK TO THEM

Last week, during a televised address that touched on the many crises afflicting his nation, Musharraf said al Qaeda was beaten in Pakistan and the focus was now on the Taliban.

"We have designed a new strategy against Taliban," he said.

Foreign fighters would be eliminated, and cross-border infiltration into Afghanistan stopped.

The government would also seek a political solution to stop the Taliban imposing its ways in the

semi-autonomous tribal lands and settled areas of North West Frontier Province.

More tribal police and paramilitary troops would be recruited and the authority of the political agent, the top civil administrator, and tribal chieftains restored through ongoing tribal councils, or jirgas.

This softer approach, according to analysts, was recognition that the military option risked creating a long running conflict with the fiercely independent Pashtun tribes.

"The change of policy is because of the feeling it could

become an endless war," said Rahimullah Yusufzai, a veteran journalist and expert on tribal affairs based in Peshawar.

Ahmed Rashid, journalist and author of "Taliban", foresaw Islamist parties who promote Taliban values becoming even stronger in the tribal lands, NWFP and Baluchistan, as a result.

"The military strategy seems a cross-purposes. In seeking short-term peace agreements, the potential long term damage to Pakistan is incalculable," Rashid said.