

Where the Heck is Central Sulawesi and Why Should I Care?

Written by Dan G. Cox

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DAN G. COX, SEP 20 2012

Certainly, during the Reagan Administration, the U. S. Army had no inkling it would end up purchasing tourist maps from a local shop in order to conduct rescue operations in Grenada. The Army, in fact, the entire Department of Defense had no idea at the conclusion of Operation Desert Storm that U.S. forces would be returning to Iraq after only a little over ten years later. Further, no one in the defense community could have foreseen that the United States would be drawn into a long counterinsurgency campaign at the same time. At the time of Desert Storm, Sudan was a place of little geopolitical significance, and few people knew of what would become an extremely successful counterinsurgency/counterterrorism campaign by U. S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the Philippines. The point of all this is that while U.S. military intervention will happen where it happens, that while it is hard to predict, ignoring potentially strategically important conflicts in far-flung locales that few can name would be a grave error in judgment.

The island of Sulawesi in Indonesia is one of these far-flung locales that has the potential to turn into a Darfur- or Southern Philippines-type conflict. As Indonesia is dually important for strategic reasons—first, to the U. S. foreign policy pivot toward Asia, and second, as a country with the world's largest Islamic population (which is mainly secularized and democratizing)—the conflict in central Sulawesi immediately takes on paramount importance.

Central Sulawesi has always had religious tensions between the Protestant Christians and Muslims living on the island. However, the dictatorships of Soekarno and Soeharto kept a lid on these religious tensions. The pot boiled over in 1998 shortly after President Soeharto resigned his office. The violence that erupted came from a simple incident where a young Christian stabbed a Muslim in the arm on 24 December 1998.[1] Local leaders exploited the mounting tensions and soon had groups of Muslims and Christians attacking neighborhoods populated by the opposing religion. The resultant violence from 1998 to 2002 caused the deaths of over 1000 civilians and displaced tens of thousands more.[2]

The reason the violence was so devastating over this four-year period is three-fold. First, local police and military units often did nothing or joined in with one side or the other in the violence. Second, there had been a huge influx of Muslim immigrants from Java just prior to Soeharto's exit from office.[3] Third, the national military was slow to respond to this crisis.

The slow response of the military allowed the violence to multiply on the island of Sulawesi because the violent terror group, Laskar Jihad, began pouring in people and resources on behalf of the Muslims in the summer of 2001.[4] When the military finally did respond in 2002, it did so effectively.[5] Part of the reason the military succeeded may have to do with the local geography and the centralization of the conflict. Sulawesi is shaped almost exactly like the fictional island drawn by David Galula in his book, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, as an example of a perfect place to practice counterinsurgency. The violence was contained almost completely in one centralized location again fitting into Galula's archetype of a perfect place to practice counterinsurgency.[6] The only complicating factor here was the presence of external terror and insurgent groups, but Laskar Jihad itself was in the throes of death, ultimately disbanding after its failure in Sulawesi.

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There was sporadic violence from 2002 until 2007. During this time another regional terror group, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), began helping Muslims attack Christians, but at a much slower rate than when Laskar Jihad intervened. By 2007, the central government was fully committed and some police raids resulted in several shootouts with JI militants in the Muslim district of Poso, Tanah Runtu, which resulted in many key JI terrorists dead. This coupled with police raids and arrests at several militant Muslim religious schools eventually brought a period of quiescence to the island of Sulawesi.[7]

A peace agreement signed earlier in 2002 between Christian and Muslim leaders seemed to be holding. All that changed in the summer of 2012 when violence once again erupted on the island of Sulawesi. By March 2012, four people had been killed in intercommunity violence on Sulawesi.[8] On 20 August 2012, another person was killed as clashes between Christian and Muslim villages ramped up. This clash brought out both local police and a platoon of local infantry but they were insufficient to quell the fighting.[9] The next day an Indonesian journalist covering the story of the village clashes from the day before was injured by shrapnel from a homemade cannon.[10]

There is an economic component to the ongoing conflict as well: the proposed Donggi-Senoro liquefied natural gas production proposal has run into local criticism for its lack of a mechanism enabling proceeds from the venture to be shared with all of the local residents around the proposed production facility.[11] It also appears that corruption is still an ongoing concern on Sulawesi. Corruption and perceptions of unfair economic treatment were one of the key causes to the first round of violence from 1998-2007.[12]

Unfortunately, it appears that Sulawesi is on a trajectory for more and more communal violence. Since religion has been overlaid the tensions solidifying groups by internal agitators and outside radical groups, this has the potential to become a Darfur-esque type of problem. Refugees from continued fighting will have a difficult time leaving the island. Therefore, if violence continues to expand, a large internally displaced persons problem will materialize.

More concerning is the conflict's propensity to draw in outside Islamic terror groups. Both Laskar Jihad and the still active JI have a history of interfering on behalf of the Muslims on Sulawesi. With Al Qaeda pledging support to the nearby Rohingya Muslim group in Burma and even the Taliban expressing interest in interfering in Burma, it seems like it is only a matter of time before the conflict on Sulawesi again draws terror organizations into the conflict.

While there is an equal chance that the current round of conflict on Sulawesi will die down, the disturbing aspect of this conflict is that it is not on any radar screens in the west. With the pivot toward Air/Sea Battle and projecting China as the new prime boogeyman, smaller conflicts, which are much more likely to draw in U. S. forces, have gone unnoticed. This is largely to the detriment of military planners and political strategists who seem to have become myopically focused on the idea of China as the emerging threat for the next ten years. No one anticipated U. S. intervention in Grenada or Afghanistan. Ignoring seemingly innocuous conflicts in smaller countries and regions seems perilous given the historical antecedents.

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[1] *Human Rights Watch*, "Breakdown: Four Years of Communal Violence in Central Sulawesi," (4 December 2002), <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher,HRW,,IDN,3e3141720,0.html> (First accessed 8/21/2012).

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Global Security*, "Sulawesi," <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/sulawesi.htm> (First accessed 8/21/2012).

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Human Rights Watch*, (4 December 2002).

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[6] David Galula, "Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice," (New York: Praeger, 1964), 38.

[7] *Global Security*, "Sulawesi," <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/sulawesi.htm> (First accessed 8/21/2012).

[8] *Jakarta Globe*, "Central Sulawesi Brawl Ends With 8 Motorcycles Torched," (11 March 2012) <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/central-sulawesi-brawl-ends-with-8-motorcycles-torched/504048> (First accessed 8/14/2012).

[9] *Jakarta Globe*, "One Dead in Central Sulawesi Clash of Villages," (20 August 2012) <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/one-dead-in-central-sulawesi-clash-of-villages/539295> (First accessed 8/22/2012).

[10] *Jakarta Globe*, "Indonesian Journalist Injured in Ongoing Violence in Central Sulawesi," (21 August 2012) <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/indonesian-journalist-injured-in-ongoing-violence-in-central-sulawesi/539416> (First accessed 8/22/2012).

[11] Tito Summa Siahaan, "Locals' Anger May Cause Headaches For Sulawesi LNG Project," *Jakarta Globe* (31 July 2012) <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/business/locals-anger-may-cause-headaches-for-sulawesi-lng-project/533863> (First accessed 8/21/2012).

[12] *Human Rights Watch*, (4 December 2002).

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Dan G. Cox is a professor of political science at the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies. He is interested in systems thinking, operational art, strategy, and anticipating the future of conflict. He is currently working on a book anticipating future pandemic shocks and their implications tentatively entitled *Breaking Point*.