

Transborder Traffic in Southeast Asia

By *Shiraishi Takashi*

TRANSBORDER traffic in Southeast Asia, above all in the Celebes Sea, between the northern part of Indonesia's Sulawesi and Mindanao in the southern Philippines, has attracted much attention recently. This is in part because of the discovery of a regional network of Indonesia's most prominent radical Islamic group, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The JI maintained its military training camp in Mindanao, in a remote corner of the Abu Bakar complex from 1996 to 2000 in an arrangement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The recruits included members of the JI and of like-minded jihadist organizations. There were (and perhaps still are) a great deal of transborder movements of JI activists, disguised as traders, who regularly travel cross borders between Indonesia and the Philippines.

A report* by the International Crisis Group (ICG) describes some of the JI activists' movements between northern Sulawesi and Mindanao. One of the important recruiters for Mindanao training was Utomo Pamungkas or Mubarok, who was trained in Afghanistan and worked as the head of JI's Manado (Menado) branch. He engaged in arms smuggling operations in 1999-2001 to bring weapons from Mindanao to Manado with the help of Sardjono Gabriel, a fisherman from the small port of Peta on Sangihe island. Mubarok helped him purchase a boat in 1997, which became the main means for recruiting members from Java across to Mindanao and bringing arms back.

Suryadi, another JI activist, who became involved with the jihadist organization Wahdah Islamiyah in the early 1990s, went to Camp Abu Bakar in 1997. He left for Bitung, accompanied by a man called Kahar Mustafa, a courier who took the JI recruits back and forth to Mindanao. Wahdah Islamiyah

is an organization whose members were largely responsible for the Makassar bombing in 2002. From Bitung, he went to Davao. In late 1997, Suryadi and his friends returned from General Santos to Indonesia. They were arrested at a port in the Sangihe-Talaud archipelago for carrying bomb detonators. They, however, managed to "make an arrangement with the police," and reached Peta the next day where they met Sardjono and continued to Manado.

On his return, Suryadi was asked by Wahdah Islamiyah leaders to take over Kahar's position as a "courier." Suryadi agreed in part because he had started a business to buy cosmetics in the Philippines to sell them in Sulawesi. During his trips, he also bought weapons with help of an Indonesian "who was married to a Filipina, lived in General Santos, and was apparently a frequent visitor to Camp Abu Bakar." In 2000, Suryadi boarded a ship in General Santos for Bitung with "a carton marked 'tuna fish,' bribed Philippine customs agents, and successfully entered Indonesia." From there he continued on to Makassar, where he delivered the arms to Wahdah Islamiyah.

The ICG concluded its report by arguing that its account illustrates "the importance of traditional border crossing locations for the JI" and "of ensuring that the police and immigration officials assigned to these areas are both vigilant and incorruptible." It is important to note that the above flows and movements of recruits and weapons between Indonesia and the Philippines take advantage of existing routes and networks in the transborder traffic zone.

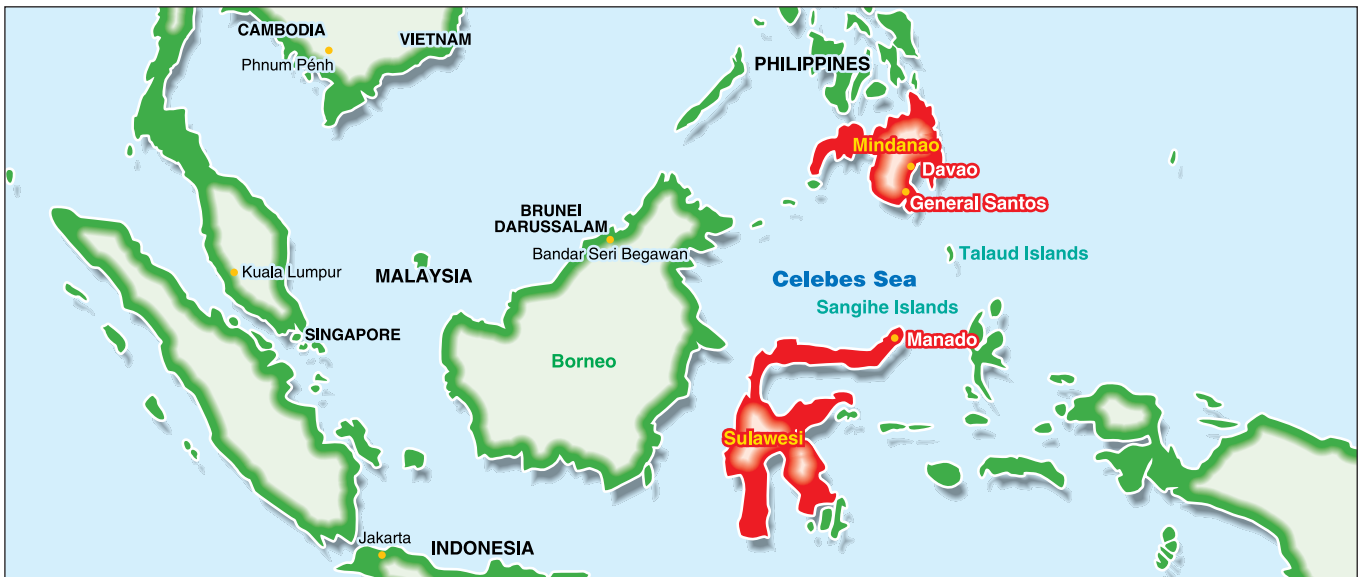
There are several border-crossing routes between Mindanao and Manado. One is the Sangihe route, in which people go from Manado to the port of Peta,

then proceed to General Santos. Another is the Talaud route, in which people go from Manado to Talaud, where they obtain fuel and food, complete the paperwork for immigration and customs and then proceed to Davao City. The more institutionalized Bitung-Davao and the Bitung-General Santos routes are important for cargo-ship traffic. Trade links by these routes take advantage of the volatility of exchange rates to generate profit. For example when the Indonesian rupiah fell to the level of Rp. 10,000 to 15,000 against one US dollar in the crisis of 1998, cross-border trade boomed. Many Filipino traders came to Bitung and Manado to buy goods to sell in the Philippines, ranging detergents and tooth-paste to automobile tires, pottery and furniture. As the rupiah strengthened and stabilized, however, traffic between Manado and Bitung and Davao and General Santos declined.

There are also people who cross borders illegally to avoid immigration and customs. This is possible because these illegal border-crossers are familiar with the routes and schedules of maritime patrols which are, in any case, rarely conducted. Illegal routes are a lot shorter than the legal ones. For routes using the cluster of the Sangihe islands as a traffic lane, the port of Peta remains the port of departure. Illegal border-crossers go directly from Peta to General Santos City without stopping over at ports for immigration and customs paperwork. These illegal border-crossers normally use passenger motor boats called Pamboats, many of which are owned and produced in Sangihe and Talaud. There are two types of them. The first type, used by fishermen, is smaller, with a passenger capacity of 8-10 people carrying their loads. This vessel is what people usually refer to as a Pamboat. The second type of pamboat, the Fuso, is named after a Japanese brand of diesel truck engine and can carry 10 tons.

Although we cannot fully rely on trade statistics to understand what kinds of goods are traded in this traffic zone, if

*Note: "Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: Damaged, but Still Dangerous." 26 Aug. 2003.



the trade statistics do serve as indicators, two observations can be made. One is that traded goods are mostly for daily use, such as detergents, seasonings, clothes and sandals. Another is that companies operating in this zone are predominantly fishery firms. From Manado to the Philippines, goods that enjoy brisk sales and generate good profits include different brands of detergent (whether in powder, liquid or cake form), leather sandals and seasonings. From Sangihe and Talaud, the goods include agricultural and forest products, especially copra or coconut kernels which attract good prices in the Philippine market. From the Philippines come paintings in different shapes and sizes, mini-aquariums, various sandals (particularly plastic ones), umbrellas, perfume, pottery, kitchen utensils, plates, ceramic bowls and toys.

People cross borders mainly for trade, but there are residents of Sangihe and Talaud who work in the Philippines for five to six days a week and go back home for the weekend. Traders stay one week to a month when they visit the Philippines. There are also people from Sangihe and Talaud who have lived in the Philippines for generations. The Indonesian Consulate in Davao esti-

mates that there are 7,500 people from Sangihe and Talaud currently residing in the Philippines, while the Philippine Commissioner of Immigration estimates that there are 12,000 to 15,000 such people.

As far as border security is concerned, on the Indonesian side, officials at the border traffic post consist of personnel from the navy, police, customs and immigration. These officials, however, do not have any authority to allow border crossers to carry goods exceeding US\$250 in value. Because traders normally exceed the maximum allowance, officials impose extra levies, which in practice are subject to negotiation. On the Philippine side, it is the customs and coast guard who deal with both legal and illegal border-crossers such imports at General Santos and Davao.

The illegally brought goods are considerably larger in the volume than legal flows. Illegal border-crossers also deal in hard liquors and firearms, which are obtained at the Philippine black market, especially from agents of Filipino landlords and the Communist New People's Army. Almost all the traders choose illegal sea lanes not just because the goods they carry exceed the limits set by the state and they do not want to pay the

extra levy, but because the procedures set by the state are complicated and can be circumvented if officials are bribed.

The discussion above should serve to clarify the fact that state-defined legality and illegality do not exhaust the full range and significance of people's actions in this gray area. The Indonesian and Philippine states and their agents insert themselves into – and tap – the flows of goods and peoples for their own purposes. Local people who live within and across the border have long adapted their lives and activities either in accommodation or resistance to this reality, or else in evasion or circumvention of it. The most basic fact of life in this area is that border-crossers, whether legal or illegal, have to go through, and often bribe, state officials. It is precisely the porosity of these borders, and the ambiguous distinction of legality and illegality that enabled groups such as the JI to create networks of their own by tapping existing trade channels.

J.S

Shiraishi Takashi is a professor at GRIPS, the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies. He specializes in Asian studies and international relations.