



Journalist Baker Atyani's 18 months captive by the Abu Sayyaf

by Maria A. Ressa January 24, 2017

Journalist Baker Atyani relives the 18 months he was held captive by the Abu Sayyaf.

MANILA, Philippines – Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana says the Abu Sayyaf is still [holding 25 hostages](#) in the southern Philippines.

Rappler's Maria Ressa, who handled the crisis negotiations for the release of 3 Filipino journalists in 2008, talks to Jordanian journalist Baker Atyani, who was kidnapped by the Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines on June 12, 2012. He was the last journalist to interview Osama bin Laden before 9/11.

Atyani walks out of the jungles of Sulu 18 months after he was kidnapped.

He returns to the Philippines 3 years later to document his ordeal.

TRANSCRIPT:

Maria: Hello and welcome, I'm Maria Ressa. This is Rappler Talk and today, with us, is Baker Atyani. He was held hostage by the Abu Sayyaf for 18 months and he is back in the Philippines. Baker, thanks for joining us.

Baker: Thank you very much, and I'm happy to be back in the Philippines.

Maria: It is good to have you back in Manila.

Baker: Thank you very much.

Maria: 18 months with the Abu Sayyaf. I mean, I cannot imagine what that is like. How did this affect you?

Baker: Well, I thought I should look into it from a positive way, in a positive way. I know I've been given another life. Now I say I have two birthdays; 4th of December is my also birthday, when I got back my freedom. So I think, now, I appreciate life more. I appreciate things around me more. And I think there is nothing that I can now call a problem after what I have seen.

Yeah, this is what I say. I could have some challenges but there's no problem. When I was there I used to think about what are the biggest problems I have faced before this, before my kidnapping, then I thought, there is nothing. There was nothing that I could call a problem in life, actually. It's just a challenge. So I think, this made me more happy. More positive and looking forward to do better things in life. And at the same time I want to carry on with my job because I believe more now in this job, being a journalist. I guess it's a noble job. Giving truth to people. Exposing corrupt people. I think it's something I believe in more now.

Maria: How did you survive the 18 months?

Baker: The hope, I always had this hope in my heart that I'll be back one day and I'll be telling people about what happened to me. So this hope that I kept in my heart, definitely it was not all the time. Every day, I used to feel that I won't really survive but at the same time every day I used to feel, no, there is a hope that one day I'll go back to life; I'll meet my loved ones, I'll see this life again. So this feeling of, being like, sometimes, very hopeful or sometimes you totally collapse, I used to feel it every day. But in general, I was very optimistic and I was feeling in my heart that one day I'd go back to this life, and I'll meet the people again. And I used to keep myself busy. Like I've learned how they built their huts, for example, I used to watch them. How they cook, and I learned some of their dishes. And I cooked it.

Maria: Oh my gosh, and you learned Tausug?

Baker: Actually, I can say that I can understand it more than I can speak it, I can understand it. Spending 18 months with people who only speak Tausug makes you like, I mean, you need to understand it. You could understand it from the way their body language, keywords they're using. Like, they used to call me... They don't say hostage. They call you a *manok* (chicken), *manok* means a bird. Yeah, they say *manok*, means, the bird. So I got to learn too many things there.

Maria: You interviewed Osama Bin Laden. You went to interview the Abu Sayyaf. I mean, what's the difference between an Osama Bin Laden and the leaders of Abu Sayyaf.

Baker: Well, I guess, Al Qaeda's more ideological. And back then when I interviewed Bin Laden they were in need of media. They need the media. I guess Abu Sayyaf is less ideological, more money-driven group. Definitely they are the Muslims in that part of the world. But I don't think they are, they can be classified as an Islamic militant group, they might be militants but they are more towards money it's kind of a mafia. An organized mafia, a group. It can be classified as a group of gangsters, thugs. I don't think they're more than this.

Maria: So really, they have nothing to do with ideology? Nothing to do with the...

Baker: Absolutely, they have nothing to do with ideology. Yes, they have nothing because even they don't know much about the ideology they are claiming they believe in, they know nothing almost or they have less knowledge. People who are living in the jungle...They don't go to school, some of them don't even know how to read. So I always say they are, I'm not trying to insult anyone. But in fact I'm just describing the situation - they are ignorant.

Maria: What else did you learn about the Abu Sayyaf in your 18 months with them?

Baker: Abu Sayyaf is not a group that we should classify as a group, well-structured, with hierarchy, with different like leaders, no. In fact, it's just the biggest group, the biggest family in Sulu. Sahiron's family made him the leader of the ASG, at the same time you have different other subgroups, subleaders, who work independently. And to get the name of ASG like a franchise, they need to give spoils of these ransoms or whatever money they get to the main leader of ASG who is Radullan Sahiron. So it's just like, as I said, an organized crime group.

Maria: Do you think a military solution works? The government now is throwing thousands of troops into Jolo. Do you think that will solve that?

Baker: I don't think this would help alone. Because I believe, I have witnessed enough to say that there are too many people outside the jungle who are involved and helping ASG. Giving them the tips on who they should kidnap, getting involved in negotiations, supplying them with ammunition and weapons, protecting them, using them so there are too many people who are the beneficiaries of what is called ASG is more than the group itself.

Maria: From what you saw there, how do you solve a problem like the Abu Sayyaf?

Baker: Well, I think one: development, education. Clean governance. Not corrupt governance. And definitely there are hardcore elements which you can't deal with them but the military force.

Maria: What about the links to ISIS now that... This is your first time back in the Philippines?

Baker: Yes.

Maria: I mean, my gosh. Again, welcome back. But it's changed since you were held hostage by the Abu Sayyaf. What change do you see watching it from outside?

Baker: Well, this link to ISIS is the most important link. Because I guess they're more ideological than the other groups. And making the peace in Mindanao, on the waiting I think, could really worsen the situation. I think there should be a quick solution, this agreement with the MILF, I think should take place quickly in order really to, people should see development, in that part, people should see peace. I think this could really help. But keeping it on the waiting this way, this would really make this kind of more ideological, the extreme elements within these militant groups like MILF, even ASG, because we could see there are... From these groups, now what they call it, Philippine State, IS Philippine State came out.

Maria: When you were kidnapped, you were certain that a Filipino journalist helped in this. Could you tell us more about that?

Baker: Well, I can't really accuse him but I have enough evidence to name this gentleman as a suspect. I have enough evidence and I have given it to the police that this journalist was involved in this kidnapping episode. To what level? I'm not sure. But he was involved, he was aware of what's going to happen to me, he told them about me, he gave them the tip, he planned it well, in a way I should land in the hands of ASG. Now I have enough evidence to support what I'm saying, still, I can't really accuse anyone immediately but I can say he is a suspect, he should be interrogated. He should really come in front of a court in order to defend himself.

Maria: Do you see any movement at all in the case? You were there for 18 months and that was a few years back, right? Do you see any shift?

Baker: About my case?

Maria: Yeah.

Baker: I haven't heard anything.

Maria: We talked a little bit about ISIS. How do you see this playing out?

Baker: Well with this situation in Mosul and maybe they will move to Raqqa. I could recall, this was similar to the situation in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion. (*Editor's note: Soviet Union troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979. The Soviet Union intervened in support of the Afghan communist government in its conflict with anticommunist Muslim guerrillas.) And the Afghan controlled-Kabul, and then the fight, and then the fighters, who were, the foreign fighters who were in Afghanistan, they left. They moved to Tajikistan, they moved to Bosnia, they moved to Chechnya. And they were back to their own original countries. So definitely with this, everyone

would go back to their own countries. And unfortunately, the only spot they can really take refuge at, at this stage in Southeast Asia, is southern Philippines.

Maria: So what do you expect to happen?

Baker: I think unless there's a quick solution to the situation, or to handle the situation, we would see the same old scenario.

Maria: It's a different generation ...

Baker: We have seen Bali bombing, we have seen this old connection from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. And this connection will come into life again.

Maria: I hope that our government prevents that from happening. I'm gonna go back, one last question back to the man. It takes a particular kind of courage for you to speak about it in such hopeful terms now, right? During the darkest hours of that 18 months that you were there, what kept you going?

Baker: I made peace with myself there, I want to live, but I have no problem with dying. I mean, I have made this peace with myself so this really helped me a lot. And I was very comfortable with myself at the same time I hold on to this hope that I will go back and it's not my place, actually, to live in this jungle with these ignorant people. But sometimes, I really feel sorry for them because they don't know anything about this life, they know only this world that's surrounding them that is the jungle.

Maria: Thank you, thank you so much Baker. We've been speaking with Baker Atyani and what kept him through 18 months of being a hostage of the Abu Sayyaf and the way he looks at how will things be going in the future. I'm Maria Ressa, thanks for joining us.

Ressa is the author of [FROM BIN LADEN TO FACEBOOK](#), about the 10 days it took to free 3 ABS-CBN journalists in 2008, their kidnappers, and their links to terrorist groups globally.

Ref.: <http://www.rappler.com/nation/158503-rappler-talk-baker-atyani-18-months-with-the-abu-sayyaf>

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