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EXAMINING THE THREAT OF KIDNAP-FOR-RANSOM IN EASTERN SABAH: AN ANALYSIS OF CONTRIBUTING FACTORS AND IMPLICATIONS TO NATIONAL SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the complex maritime security landscape in Eastern Sabah, Malaysia, focusing on kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) incidents orchestrated by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Sabah's strategic location in the Tri-Border Area, encompassing waters shared with the Philippines and Indonesia, renders it vulnerable to cross-border threats, including KFR, piracy, and smuggling. The study investigates ASG's KFR modus operandi and analyses how socio-economic, geographical, and governance factors facilitate such operations. Employing qualitative research, with primary data from semi-structured interviews with members of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM), Royal Malaysia Police (RMP), Marine Police, and academic experts, this research highlights the operational dynamics of ASG, local complicity, and the role of insider knowledge in executing KFR. The findings underscore how ASG exploits Sabah's vulnerabilities, impacting regional stability and Malaysia's national security. The study concludes with recommendations for enhancing Sabah's resilience through targeted law enforcement strategies, community engagement, and sustained

regional cooperation, aiming to address the persistent security challenges posed by cross-border criminal activities.

Keywords: kidnap-for-ransom, Abu Sayyaf Group, east Sabah, security, modus operandi

INTRODUCTION

Maritime security has faced increasingly complex challenges over the last decade, with threats ranging from piracy and armed robbery to terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and kidnapping for ransom (KFR). These transnational criminal activities compromise regional stability, often eluding national borders and jurisdictions, which complicates prevention, detection, and enforcement efforts (UNODC 2019). Over the past decade, KFR incidents have increased globally by 275%, reflecting a significant rise in economic and politically motivated kidnappings, particularly in Southeast Asia, where groups like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) exploit the region's vulnerabilities (Mohamed 2008). High-profile incidents, such as the ASG's kidnappings in the Jolo and Basilan islands of the Philippines, demonstrate the region's susceptibility to cross-border crimes that target local and foreign tourists, workers, and journalists (US Department of State 2019). These incidents are often underreported due to inconsistencies in categorisation and recording practices, which hinders the ability to accurately assess the magnitude of the problem (Mon 2018; Mullins 2020). Moreover, the region's security landscape also includes persistent territorial disputes, regional instability, and smuggling networks that exploit its extensive, porous borders (Khairi, Aizat. Personal Interview, October 22, 2024).

The eastern coast of Sabah, referred to as the Tri-Border Area (TBA), encompasses the waters of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, spanning approximately 30% of Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Mon 2018). This area remains a hotspot for cross-border crimes, including KFR, piracy, and smuggling, facilitated by its extensive, challenging-to-monitor borders (Mullins 2020). ASG's ability to capitalise on these vulnerabilities underscores the dual motivations of KFR in the region, combining financial objectives with ideological aims to sustain operations and exert political leverage (Ryan 2011; Banlaoi 2006; Dutton 2023). The Sulu Sea's geographic characteristics and weak governance have created an environment conducive to KFR activities, further complicating maritime security efforts (Pangaribuan, Wibisono, and Mamoto 2022).

Furthermore, the nexus between terrorism and organised crime has become more pronounced, with Malaysian-based groups engaging in human trafficking, smuggling, and KFR to fund their operations (Aslam 2020). Partnerships between terrorist organisations and organised crime networks highlight the adaptability of these groups in response to enhanced law enforcement measures aimed at disrupting their funding streams (Vanar and Lee 2023). Sabah's geographical vulnerabilities, combined with socio-economic challenges and insider complicity, have created a complex security landscape that ASG has effectively exploited. Moreover, the situation is further compounded by persistent territorial claims from the Philippines and broader maritime disputes in the South China Sea and Sulawesi Sea, intensifying Malaysia's national security concerns (Dollah, Ramli. Personal Interview, October 7, 2024). Additionally, the adverse impact of repeated KFR incidents on Malaysia's tourism sector is mitigated by studies showing international tourists often perceive these events as isolated and transitory, reflecting resilience within the industry (Som, Aun, and AlBattat 2015).

Therefore, this study focuses on two research questions: Firstly, what specific methods and enabling factors facilitated ASG's KFR activities along Sabah's eastern coast? Secondly, how have these KFR incidents impacted Malaysia's national security, particularly concerning sovereignty and territorial integrity? By exploring these questions, the study contributes to the literature by identifying nuanced socio-economic and geopolitical factors that exacerbate the KFR threat. The law enforcement mechanism, including efficacy and challenges, has also been addressed. The study ultimately proposes targeted strategies for policymakers and law enforcement to enhance Sabah's resilience against such cross-border security challenges in the future.

Methodology of this Study

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology, focusing on in-depth interviews and secondary data sources to understand the factors enabling kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) activities in Eastern Sabah comprehensively. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in January 2020 and October 2024 with participants directly connected to the security and law enforcement landscape in Sabah, as well as academic experts on regional security. A total of five interviews involved members of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM), Royal Malaysia Police (RMP), Marine Police, and two academicians, providing valuable insights into operational challenges and security dynamics associated with KFR.

Key stakeholders were selected for interviews based on their in-depth perspectives and direct involvement in, or knowledge of, the security landscape in Eastern Sabah. ESSCOM personnel provided insights into operational strategies and the challenges of securing the region, while the RMP and Marine Police shared experiences related to law enforcement and inter-agency coordination. Academics contributed analytical perspectives, providing socio-political and historical context

essential to understanding the multi-faceted nature of the KFR threat. To maintain confidentiality, participants were anonymised and coded according to their affiliations—ESSCOM personnel were labelled as “Informant 1,” a member of the RMP as “Informant 2,” and a member of the Marine Police as “Informant 3.” This ensured both privacy and clarity in presenting perspectives.

Secondary sources, including relevant literature, government reports, and incident analyses, complemented the primary data. The interview data were analysed using manual thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to ASG’s operational methods, Sabah’s socio-economic vulnerabilities, and broader national security implications. This approach facilitated an organised synthesis of qualitative insights, enabling the identification of patterns and relationships that highlight the complexities of KFR activities in the region. Aligning interview data with secondary sources ensured a coherent and comprehensive analysis of KFR’s multi-dimensional impacts.

UNDERSTANDING NATIONAL SECURITY SIGNIFICANCE AND CROSS-BORDER THREATS IN SABAH

National security, a concept that has evolved to encompass a wide range of threats beyond traditional military concerns, is fundamental to a nation’s stability and sovereignty. According to Barry Buzan’s seminal work *People, States, and Fear* (2007), national security must account for threats not only to the physical integrity of the state but also to its political, economic, societal, and environmental stability. This multi-dimensional approach recognises that security threats extend beyond conventional warfare to include issues that can undermine state function and societal cohesion. Similarly, Arnold Wolfers describes national security as an “ambiguous symbol” (1952) due to its broad scope, which includes threats posed by non-state actors and criminal organisations. Moreover, Bock and Berkowitz

(1966) emphasise that national security now requires integrated approaches across military, economic, and cooperative international strategies to protect internal values against both internal and external threats.

In practice, national security involves protecting the country and its population against foreign threats and attacks, primarily through maintaining armed forces and safeguarding sensitive information (Holmes 2014). Modern combat, unlike many past conflicts, is characterised by increasing irregularity, with non-traditional conflicts between state and non-state actors becoming more common. Addressing such threats requires a focus on influencing and protecting local populations, effectively managing the dynamics that adversaries might exploit (Scanzillo 2010). In Malaysia's context, its borders with Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines, coupled with its proximity to the South China Sea, the Straits of Malacca, and the Sulu Sea, expose it to a wide range of cross-border threats posed by armed groups like the kidnap-for-ransom groups (KFRGs) (Briggs 2001). Sabah's strategic location and extensive, porous maritime borders make it vulnerable to one of the cross-border threats, including kidnap-for-ransom incidents orchestrated by groups like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) (Idris and Tiung 2022). Although reported KFR activities have seen a decline, Sabah remains a focal point for national security due to its broader geopolitical context. The interplay of ongoing territorial claims, smuggling activities, and regional instability contributes to a security landscape that is far from stable. The potential for resurgence in KFR or similar threats by other groups continues to be a concern, underscoring the need for sustained vigilance and proactive measures. These overlapping threats not only affect Sabah but pose significant challenges to Malaysia's overall approach to safeguarding its borders and maintaining regional stability (Dollah, Ramli. Personal Interview, October 7, 2024; Khairi, Aizat. Personal Interview, October 22, 2024).

The repeated kidnappings in the eastern coastal areas of Sabah underscore a critical issue: Sabah's geographic position not only offers natural beauty with islands such as Sipadan, Semporna, and Langkayan but also presents unique challenges for maritime security. These geographic vulnerabilities have led to significant security and economic repercussions, particularly affecting tourism and fisheries. For instance, both domestic and international tourists had been deterred by the risk of abduction, affecting local enterprises reliant on tourism and maritime trade (Jong, Puah and Arip 2020; Buigut, Kapar and Braendle 2021). Furthermore, the 2013 Lahad Datu incursion by Sulu insurgents directly challenged Malaysia's sovereignty, underscoring Sabah's ongoing exposure to security risks that extend beyond KFR activities. This has led to the federal government's declaration of Sabah's east coast as a Special Security Area (SSA) in 2013, which was later reinforced by establishing the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) and the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) to enhance security measures (Jawhar and Sariburaja 2016).

A curfew was also implemented on July 16, 2014, covering six districts in response to kidnapping incidents and other security challenges. This curfew remains in effect across ESSZONE's territorial waters, underscoring the persistent security risks faced by the region (Government of the United Kingdom, 2023). According to Sabah Police Commissioner Datuk Abd Rashid Harun, the arrest of high-profile individuals like Abraham, a former Abu Sayyaf member involved in several KFR incidents, illustrates the ongoing challenges posed by militant groups. Additionally, Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay, an anti-terrorism chief, highlighted that over 20 individuals between the ages of 20 and 40, some with links to the Islamic State (IS), have been arrested since 2016 for financing terrorism, underscoring the broader web of non-state actors in the region (Aslam 2018; Levenia and Sciascia 2020).

In this framework, kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) activities represent a pressing security threat that disrupts local stability and national sovereignty. The ASG's exploitation of Sabah's coastal vulnerabilities highlights the persistent risks posed by non-state terrorist actors operating with impunity across porous borders. Although reported KFR activities have declined due to enhanced security efforts, the threat remains due to the profitability of such operations and the region's proximity to unstable areas in the southern Philippines. Sabah's unique socio-political and geographical context makes intelligence-gathering and vigilance essential components in pre-empting KFR threats, particularly given the potential for new groups to exploit these vulnerabilities (Dollah, Ramli. Personal Interview, October 7, 2024).

Furthermore, Sabah's security landscape is complicated by the presence of other terrorist and militant organisations operating across regional borders. Even in the absence of recent KFR cases, the potential resurgence of such activities persists, driven by ongoing political instability in neighbouring regions. Understanding KFR within an expanded national security framework enables Malaysia to adopt a comprehensive approach, addressing not only the immediate threats posed by the ASG but also ensuring preparedness against similar threats from other groups, thereby enhancing the nation's resilience against future challenges to Sabah's security and Malaysia's sovereignty.

ABU SAYYAF AND THEIR KIDNAP-FOR-RANSOM ACTIVITIES ON THE EAST COAST OF SABAH

Kidnapping, among other cross-border crimes, challenged the security and lives of people in Sabah. Abu Sayyaf conducted kidnappings with the help of its more comprehensive terrorist network. In order to understand the enabling factors and modus operandi of ASG, it is essential to discuss this terrorist group and its

objectives briefly. ASG was founded by Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani in 1989 and known for its violent activities, such as bombing, kidnapping, and murder of dignitaries (VIPs), among others. ASG also conducted KFR activities in the Philippines (Fellman 2011).

ASG Objectives and Criminal Activities

Kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) is a criminal activity in which an organisation conducts kidnappings to extract ransom payments. A Kidnap-for-ransom group (KFRG) refers specifically to a criminal group responsible for KFR, typically conducted in groups rather than by individuals. The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) became a significant security threat, beginning with kidnappings off Sabah's east coast in 2000. Other KFR groups have since followed ASG's lead, but ASG has been involved in nearly all KFR cases reported in Sabah's eastern coastal region (Banlaoi 2019).

KFR has been highly lucrative for ASG, which imposes substantial ransom demands on victims. The group uses psychological tactics, such as intimidation and threats of execution, to coerce families into paying (Ladjana 2019). In most cases, hostages are released after the ransom is paid, though there are instances of successful rescues and, tragically, cases where hostages were killed (Vannini, Detotto and McCannon 2015). ASG assigns specific roles to members to ensure smooth execution of these kidnappings.

Abductions on Sabah's east coast are frequently attributed to ASG. Between 2000 and 2014, 43 kidnappings on Sabah's east coast were traced back to Jolo in the southwestern Philippines (Rahman and Rahman 2022). In 2017, no incidents were recorded; however, ESSCOM reported 40 cases from 2018 to 2020 (Bernama 2020). According to an ESSCOM commander, no KFR cases have occurred since

2020 (Miwil 2021). In 2021, Malaysian police shot five Abu Sayyaf members linked to Islamic State in Sabah, following arrests of eight ASG members and 29 others on Borneo Island (Chang 2021). Hence, a thorough examination of ASG's modus operandi is essential to understanding KFR dynamics.

Abu Sayyaf's Modus Operandi

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) came under Radullan Sahiron's leadership following the death of Khadaffy Janjalani. ASG comprises various sub-groups led by individuals such as Apo Mike, Salip Mura Kayawan, Almujaer Yadah, Indang Susukan, and Raden Abuh. These sub-groups have facilitators who assist with KFR (kidnap-for-ransom) activities, operating primarily out of Sulu with approximately 350–400 members (FMT 2022). Apo Mike, Raden Abuh, and Indang Susukan were killed in separate security operations, while Almujaer Yadah surrendered. ASG's involvement in kidnappings dates back to incidents such as those in Pulau Sipadan and Pulau Pandanan in 2000, alongside other cases (Forest 2010). Recently, several ASG terrorists involved in kidnappings along Sabah's east coast have been killed. The modus operandi of ASG and factors contributing to KFR incidents were detailed by members of ESSCOM, RMP, and Marine Police during interviews. Figure 1 illustrates several stages of ASG's kidnapping process in Sabah based on these interviews.

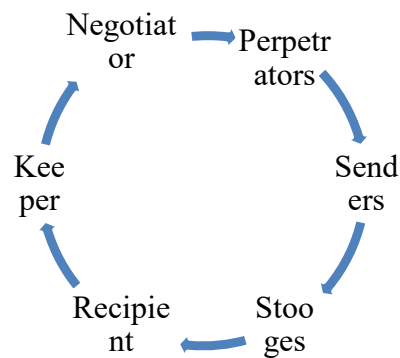


Figure 1: ASG Modus Operandi for Kidnappings

Source: ESSCOM Unpublished Document, 2020

The initiation of a KFR operation typically begins with the actions of perpetrators responsible for the kidnappings. Their role involves gathering information to facilitate the safe abduction of individuals or groups. They are well acquainted with the region's waters, as some ASG members reside in Sabah or have prior KFR experience. The next stage involves the sender(s), often Suluk community members, who support ASG's operations by transporting individuals to the eastern coastal waters of Sabah. This support stems from ASG's perception as a "modern-day Robin Hood," redistributing ransom earnings to impoverished communities in the southern Philippines. Another role is that of stooges, or local accomplices, who provide logistical support, temporary shelter, and intelligence on law enforcement patrols (ESSCOM Unpublished Document 2020). These stooges typically include individuals from Sabah's east coast and those engaged in smuggling activities (Avineshwaran 2014).

Once victims are transported to the southern Philippines, they are handed over to the recipient—an ASG member responsible for moving hostages to secure locations to negotiate ransoms. The ransom amounts are distributed among all involved parties, highlighting collaboration between ASG sub-groups with shared objectives. Another key role is the keeper, who ensures the hostages' welfare, providing essential sustenance like food and water. These keepers are often new recruits or orphans from the southern Philippines. Finally, the negotiator, typically an experienced ASG member such as a commander or sub-commander, manages ransom negotiations and acts as a mediator (ESSCOM Unpublished Document 2020).

Abu Sayyaf Terrorists Hideouts and Targets

The execution of KFR activities necessitated crossing national maritime borders. Additionally, perpetrators required concealed locations to evade detection by law enforcement agencies and to serve as operational bases for their KFR endeavours. Consequently, certain areas on the east coast of Sabah were used as hideouts by the ASG. Situated within the reef area, Pondohan serves as a settlement for the Pulauh community, providing suitable seclusion for ASG criminals. The buildings within Pondohan exhibit a durable, simplistic architectural style, featuring facilities such as boat platforms and areas for routine activities. Typically located near primary islands, Pondohan settlements often support activities such as seaweed cultivation. Given its strategic location, this area served as an ideal hiding place for Abu Sayyaf terrorists after their incursions into the country's maritime territory, with their weapons (Informant 2, Personal Interview, January 12, 2020). According to ESSCOM intelligence sources, some of the firearms in possession of occupants were obtained through smuggling activities (Bharian 2019).

Additionally, a water village situated along the coastline and major rivers on Sabah's east coast was also used as an ASG hideout. This village is divided into two sections: one primarily inhabited by native Sabahans, and another scattered area mostly occupied by illegal immigrants (Informant 3, Personal Interview, January 13, 2020).

Subsequently, the ASG identified potential kidnapping targets. These targets included (i) fishermen, (ii) merchant ships, (iii) cruise activities, (iv) seaside hotels and restaurants, and (v) slow-moving vessels. These identified KFR targets, classified as 'soft targets,' represent groups or entities susceptible to non-traditional criminal activities, such as KFR incidents. Unlike entities under the protection of security monitoring organisations, soft targets lack safeguarding measures, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation and abduction by ASG (Hamid and Dollah 2020). These incidents indicate that people living on Sabah's east coast and tourists faced kidnapping threats due to the proximity of ASG hideouts.

FACTORS ENABLING KFR ACTIVITIES AND OPERATIONS IN EASTERN SABAH

This discussion on the factors that led to the emergence of the KFR threat on the East Coast of Sabah can be divided into four main areas: (i) the piracy activities and the emergence of ASG; (ii) kidnapping as a financial resource; (iii) geographical factors, and (iv) the acquisition of information from an 'insider.'

Historical Context, Threat of Piracy, and Kidnapping

Piracy has long been a part of Sabah's coastal history, evolving from simple maritime theft into organised criminal operations that span several centuries. The term "mundu," a localised term encompassing piracy, sea robbery, kidnapping, and other illicit maritime activities, has deep roots in Sabah's socio-political landscape

(Dollah, 2004). Historically, piracy in Southeast Asia, particularly around Sabah and the Sulu Sea, was closely linked to socio-economic and political dynamics, often serving as a livelihood for marginalised coastal communities (Warren 2007). The concept of “mundu” thus reflects more than just criminal acts—it encapsulates a way of life in a historically lawless maritime region, where piracy and similar activities were both survival tactics and resistance against colonial interventions (Tregonning 1958).

Unlike the concept of piracy under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which restricts piracy to high-seas crimes committed for personal gain, “mundu” has become ingrained in the local socio-economic fabric as an accepted, albeit illegal, means to earn a living, especially in coastal communities with limited economic opportunities (Hamid and Dollah 2020). This historical context has normalised certain forms of maritime crime, viewing them as part of a continuum of survival strategies rather than isolated criminal events. Even before colonial intervention, piracy served as an essential trade and survival mechanism, with communities such as the Illanun and Balangingi known for maritime raiding that supported both the Sulu Sultanate’s economy and their subsistence needs (Majul 1973).

Since joining Malaysia in 1963, Sabah has faced piracy threats due to its proximity to the southern Philippines, a region historically associated with high criminal activity. Within this context, piracy or “mundu” has long been perceived as an economic opportunity for communities in Sabah and neighbouring regions, dating back to before Western colonialism (Dollah 2004). Over time, these piracy practices evolved, with Kidnapping for Ransom (KFR) emerging as a tactic by groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), who recognised the lucrative potential of hostage-taking over traditional maritime robbery. This shift towards KFR, highlighted by high-profile incidents such as the 2000 Sipadan Island

kidnapping of 21 hostages, demonstrated the high profit involved, making KFR an increasingly attractive tactic for ASG and other groups (Hamid and Dollah 2020). Consequently, historical piracy practices have transformed to reflect new security challenges in the region, including KFR as a high-yield method of economic gain. Despite the imposition of curfews and coastal monitoring, Sabah's extensive, porous coastline, combined with its proximity to unstable regions in the southern Philippines, continues to facilitate KFR activities. These historical patterns underscore the need for sustained security efforts that not only address current threats but also acknowledge the historical and socio-economic factors that drive these activities (Dollah, Ramli. Personal Interview, October 7, 2024).

Kidnapping as a Source of Financial Gain/ Income

Building on the historical context, the evolution from traditional piracy to KFR reflects the financial appeal of this tactic. Kidnap-for-ransom became a highly lucrative business for ASG, shifting the group's operations from ideological motives to a more pragmatic focus on economic survival. As O'Brian (2012) notes, KFR is among ASG's main income sources, earning the group an estimated \$35 million from 2000 to 2011 alone. The 2000 Sipadan Island incident, where ASG demanded substantial ransoms for the release of 21 hostages, underscores KFR's financial potential (ESSCOM Unpublished Document 2020).

ASG's reliance on KFR stems from its strategic focus on "soft targets"—individuals and communities in Sabah's coastal regions who lack robust protection. This approach enables ASG to maximise ransom profits while exerting less operational risk. Examples include incidents in 2015 and 2016, where ransom payments were negotiated through public donations, amounting to millions of dollars (Geraldine 2015). The use of soft targets not only ensures ransom payment

but also pressures victims' families and the government to respond quickly to secure hostages' release (O'Brian, 2012).

ASG's financial reliance on KFR reflects a shift from traditional piracy to a focus on KFR underscores its appeal as both a survival strategy and a recruitment tool, with ransom payments providing ASG members with economic incentives that sustain and expand their operations.

Socio-Economic Conditions and Vulnerabilities in Sabah

The socio-economic and political instability in the southern Philippines, characterised by governance gaps and ethnic tensions, has historically provided fertile ground for KFR activities. While Malaysia currently directs its focus towards conflict areas such as Cotabato, Sabah's immediate security needs could benefit from greater attention to the localised threats near its borders, where many coastal communities rely on high-risk marine activities (Dollah, Ramli. Personal Interview, 7 October 2024). These socio-economic dynamics in Sabah, including a significant migrant population and reliance on fisheries, heighten vulnerability to KFR activities and complicate deportation processes, indirectly impacting Malaysia's national security (Khairi, Aizat. Personal Interview, 22 October 2024). Disruptions from KFR incidents discourage tourism, deter investment, and place prolonged strain on local economies, further incentivising involvement with criminal networks.

The longstanding interplay of historical, socio-cultural, and economic factors has enabled ASG to entrench its presence in Eastern Sabah. By 2018, nearly one-third of Sabah's population comprised foreigners, with a significant number undocumented, posing ongoing security challenges (H.A. Rahman 2020). While recent measures have reduced immediate threats, continuous vigilance, intelligence gathering, and strategic law enforcement responses remain essential to

mitigating future risks and protecting Sabah from potential exploitation by other terrorist or criminal organisations.

Geographical Factors of Sabah's East Coast

Malaysia's strategic maritime borders expose Sabah's eastern coast to cross-border threats (Patrick 2018). The Sulu Sea, a large body of water spanning 260,000 square kilometres between the southwest Philippines and northeast Sabah, comprises both large islands like Palawan and Jolo, and numerous smaller islands. This expansive region provides natural hideouts and escape routes, which ASG and similar groups exploit, particularly given the lack of consistent enforcement presence across these waters.

The vastness of Sabah's eastern waters, covering an area of approximately 1,384 kilometres (Dollah et al. 2016), presents significant challenges for security agencies like the Marine Police, Royal Malaysian Navy, and Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA). This area's topography aligns with ASG's preferred modus operandi of executing kidnappings in border-adjacent waters, known as "soft areas," where they can quickly retreat to the Philippine border. Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim, a former Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, noted that ASG's strategic use of these soft areas allows the group to evade Malaysian authorities effectively (Hasnan 2016).

Furthermore, the existence of small islands in the southern Philippines provides ASG with safe havens where they can temporarily detain abducted individuals until ransoms are paid (Informant 1, Personal Interview, January 13, 2020). These islands complicate Malaysian security agencies' rescue efforts, as the islands fall under Philippine jurisdiction, beyond Malaysian operational reach. Consequently, Malaysian authorities must often rely on Philippine military support for hostage

rescue operations if ASG members successfully cross the maritime boundary with captives (Harun 2009).

Acquisition of Information from ‘Insiders’

ASG’s operations in Eastern Sabah benefit substantially from local insiders and illegal immigrants who act as informants and accomplices, forming a critical component of ASG’s intelligence network. These individuals, often with familial or ethnic connections to ASG members, predominantly come from the Suluk ethnic community, which has deep-rooted ties linking Sabah to the Sulu archipelago in the Philippines. Such shared heritage enables ASG to recruit local collaborators who provide crucial information on the movement patterns of Malaysian fishermen and local authorities in Sabah’s coastal waters (Abdullah, Jiffar, and Sidom 2019). By gathering insider knowledge on patrol schedules and identifying likely targets, ASG improved its efficiency and ability to execute kidnappings with precision and undermined state authority in the process (Dollah, Ramli. Personal Interview, October 7, 2024).

Some Sabahans of Suluk descent migrated from the Sulu Islands due to economic hardship, conflicts, or the search for employment and have established communities in Sabah over generations. These longstanding familial connections to the southern Philippines provided ASG with a support network within Sabah and allowed them to gather intelligence on local security operations. According to Dr. Asri Salleh of Universiti Teknologi Mara, locals with familial or community ties to ASG know the terrain and social structure of Eastern Sabah intimately, effectively acting as “eyes and ears” for ASG operatives. This insider knowledge enables ASG to seamlessly carry out KFR operations against both locals and foreign tourists, leveraging Sabah’s socio-cultural dynamics to their advantage

(Sabah Post 2020). Such collaboration illustrates how local informants play a significant role in undermining Sabah's law enforcement efforts.

Role of Illegal Immigrants as Informants and Spotters

Illegal immigrants, largely from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, constitute another essential layer within ASG's intelligence network. Financial vulnerability often compels these individuals to collaborate with ASG, particularly in high-risk areas, where financial incentives are offered in exchange for intelligence on maritime activity and potential targets. ASG recruits many of these immigrants as informants, while others operate as "spotters" or "lookouts" within local fishing communities, taking advantage of their routine access to maritime areas to monitor law enforcement movements and relay this information back to ASG operatives (Informant 2, Personal Interview, January 14, 2020). Such complicity aids ASG in executing KFR activities, minimising the risk of their operatives being apprehended.

A case in 2019 exemplifies this dynamic, where several Sabah-based individuals with ASG connections were apprehended for supporting KFR operations by providing transportation and temporary shelter. This collaboration underscores the broader security vulnerabilities within Sabah's coastal framework, demonstrating the ease with which ASG can infiltrate and leverage local communities for strategic purposes (Vanar 2017). These insights reveal how illegal immigrants' roles are part of an organised intelligence network that complicates efforts by Malaysian law enforcement to secure Sabah's maritime borders.

EFFECTIVENESS OF ESSCOM

Established in 2013 in response to escalating cross-border security threats, particularly the 2013 Sulu incursion in Lahad Datu, the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) has become a pivotal entity in securing Sabah's vulnerable eastern coastline. Its mission reflects the urgency required to counter the region's complex security challenges, including the threat of kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) by groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

A primary achievement of ESSCOM has been the consistent reduction in KFR incidents along Sabah's eastern coast. Regular maritime patrols, joint operations with the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP), Marine Police, and Malaysian Armed Forces, as well as a high-risk area curfew instituted in 2014, have substantially contributed to this success, with a marked decline in kidnappings since 2020. ESSCOM's strategic partnerships with Philippine authorities, which include intelligence sharing and joint maritime patrols, have further enhanced its operational capacity, helping to prevent KFR activities from reaching Malaysian waters (Jawhar and Sariburaja 2016).

The role of intelligence as a critical tool for preempting potential threats cannot be overstated. Intelligence gathering enables ESSCOM to respond effectively and anticipate security challenges before they materialise. However, ESSCOM's current intelligence capabilities could be further strengthened to ensure a more robust defence against cross-border threats (Dollah, Ramli. Personal Interview, October 7, 2024). This emphasis on intelligence highlights the ongoing need for ESSCOM to enhance its preventative measures, not only reacting to immediate threats but also adapting proactively to shifting security dynamics in the region.

Shortcomings and Challenges of ESSCOM

ESSCOM also faces several limitations that hinder its ability to fully secure Sabah's eastern coastline. Structuring these into specific areas of challenge clarifies the barriers ESSCOM encounters, particularly regarding resources and interagency coordination. Budget constraints limit ESSCOM's access to advanced technology and essential equipment upkeep, compromising continuous maritime surveillance across Sabah's 1,700-kilometre coastline. Moreover, resource allocation decisions are sometimes influenced by geography-based justifications that overlook pressing local security needs, further impacting effectiveness. While ESSCOM has played a significant role in enhancing security in Eastern Sabah, internal challenges persist that limit its effectiveness. Budget mismanagement, competition with the National Security Council (MKN) for control over resources, and inter-agency rivalries are some of the issues that hinder ESSCOM's capacity. This creates operational inefficiencies that can be exploited by groups like ASG. Moreover, ESSCOM is sometimes perceived as a 'dumping ground' for problematic personnel from other agencies, and this, combined with resource allocation decisions driven by geographical justifications rather than pressing security needs, further complicates its mission. Further compounding these challenges are gaps in interagency cooperation. ESSCOM's original design aimed to facilitate seamless collaboration among various security forces; however, challenges in harmonising efforts and information sharing persist. Among the issues that are constantly being discussed are those related to budget control and coordination which, if not managed properly, could potentially reduce ESSCOM's operational efficacy, creating vulnerabilities that groups like ASG could exploit, especially in areas with high maritime traffic and limited ESSCOM presence (Dollah, Ramli. Personal Interview, October 7, 2024).

The Need for Enhanced Collaboration and Resources

For ESSCOM to achieve its objectives fully, it requires a strategic approach that addresses resource and coordination issues while also emphasising community partnerships. Firstly, increased funding would enable ESSCOM to improve its surveillance capabilities, invest in advanced technology such as radar and drones for monitoring remote areas, and maintain critical equipment. Secondly, strengthening interagency collaboration through regular training and shared protocols would help streamline coordination, ensuring a more unified response to emerging threats. Thirdly, building trust with local residents and establishing consistent community partnerships are essential to ESSCOM's future strategy. Such efforts enable ESSCOM to access valuable intelligence, reduce local reliance on criminal networks, and support socio-economic stability, thereby reinforcing Sabah's resilience against future threats. While ESSCOM's initiatives have notably strengthened Sabah's coastal security, its continued progress and long-term efficacy in combating cross-border threats depend on a dedicated focus towards securing resources, fostering interagency unity, and deepening community engagement (Dollah, Ramli. Personal Interview, October 7, 2024; Khairi, Aizat. Personal Interview, October 22, 2024).

KFR THREAT AND ITS IMPACTS ON NATIONAL SECURITY

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) activities compromised Sabah's border stability and exposed vulnerabilities in maritime and land surveillance (Zainol et al. 2019). The KFR threat impacted national security on multiple levels, revealing the porous nature of these borders, which are challenging to monitor effectively due to limited resources and Sabah's complex geography. The socio-economic and social impacts of KFR are also substantial. The repeated threats from KFR destabilised local industries, particularly fishing and tourism, which are heavily dependent on coastal access. The constant threat of abduction has curtailed these essential economic activities, discouraging tourism and

detering investment, both crucial for Sabah's stability (Acciaioli, Brunt, and Clifton 2017). This climate of fear impacted local communities by undermining residents' sense of security created resentment towards security efforts, particularly if these efforts are perceived as insufficient or poorly resourced.

The Trilateral Cooperation Agreement (TCA) between Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia represents a significant effort to address cross-border threats in the region. However, unresolved territorial disputes and competing national interests pose challenges to the TCA's effectiveness. Although Malaysia has a strong intelligence-sharing relationship with the Philippines, cooperation with Indonesia faces limitations. These issues highlight the complexity of regional collaboration and the need for a balanced approach that respects each nation's sovereignty while fostering joint security initiatives. Malaysia's collaborative efforts with the Philippine government, primarily through the TCA, have been instrumental in securing the eastern border against all terrorist organisations' transnational threats. However, these efforts are sometimes hampered by competing national interests and unresolved maritime disputes. Strengthening the diplomatic alliance through regular joint patrols, intelligence-sharing protocols, and coordinated rescue operations can improve responses to ASG's cross-border activities (Dollah, Ramli. Personal Interview, October 7, 2024).

The continued support for ESSCOM's curfews reflects a high level of public endorsement, but sustaining this stability depends on addressing ongoing socio-political and territorial sensitivities. Although recent measures have limited immediate KFR incidents, these underlying vulnerabilities, exacerbated by complex regional dynamics, necessitate persistent vigilance and an adaptable security framework to counter future threats effectively (Samuel et al. 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) exploits a combination of geographical, socio-economic, and governance vulnerabilities in Eastern Sabah to carry out kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) operations. Through qualitative interviews with security personnel and academic experts, it becomes evident that porous maritime borders, insider complicity, and limited enforcement resources create an environment conducive to such criminal activities. Although there has been a recent decline in KFR incidents, underlying factors—such as cross-border mobility, economic hardship, and regional instability—continue to threaten local communities and national security.

A key strength of this research lies in its in-depth, interview-based approach, which captures first-hand operational insights and contextualises the socio-economic factors that enable ASG to sustain its illegal activities. In addition, the study's focus on specific security forces and community-level conditions provides a clearer picture of the real-time challenges in mitigating KFR. However, the research is constrained by its relatively narrow scope, concentrating primarily on KFR operations linked to ASG in Eastern Sabah. This limits broader generalisation to other regions or other kidnap-for-ransom groups. The smaller sample size of interview participants and the sensitive nature of certain security data also restrict the extent of detail that can be disclosed.

Therefore, the findings underscore the pressing need for sustained vigilance and collaboration among law enforcement agencies, local communities, and regional partners. While heightened security measures have helped reduce reported KFR incidents, emerging criminal networks and unresolved socio-economic challenges may reignite similar threats if not effectively addressed.

Recommendations

A multi-faceted strategy is essential to counter the risk of kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) in Eastern Sabah. Firstly, enhancing maritime surveillance capabilities is crucial, particularly by investing in advanced radar systems, drones, and patrol vessels that would allow for a more rapid response. Such technologies could improve the ability of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) and other agencies to detect and intercept potential threats. To reinforce this effort, fostering stronger interagency collaboration through formal protocols and regular joint training exercises would streamline communication and support coordinated operational responses. In parallel, meaningful engagement with local communities is vital. Community-based awareness programmes focusing on the socio-economic repercussions of KFR, and offering alternative means of livelihood, could reduce the appeal of collaborating with criminal groups. Improved community-police relations, underpinned by trust and transparency, would further encourage the sharing of intelligence and early warning signals that can thwart potential kidnapping attempts.

Another indispensable component is the disruption of financial flows. More stringent monitoring of financial transactions in high-risk areas, in coordination with domestic and international financial intelligence units, would hinder the payment of ransoms. This would be complemented by regional cooperation under initiatives such as the Trilateral Cooperation

Agreement (TCA), which can bolster intelligence sharing, joint maritime patrols, and cross-border rescue operations.

Simultaneously, addressing socio-economic fragility in coastal regions would contribute to long-term prevention. This initiative can be implemented at both the state and federal levels, with the National Security Council (MKN) playing a central coordinating role due to its direct relevance to border security. Employment opportunities and training programmes in fisheries, tourism, and other local industries could discourage communities from facilitating or engaging in criminal activities. By strengthening socio-economic infrastructure and fostering public–private partnerships, the region’s resilience against transnational threats would be substantially increased.

Thus, these measures would not only reduce immediate vulnerabilities but also offer a sustainable and cohesive framework for maintaining security in Eastern Sabah. Recognising the interlinked nature of maritime security, governance, and local economic conditions is paramount. Through enhanced surveillance, robust regional collaboration, proactive community engagement, and a focus on building local capacity, it is possible to mitigate KFR risks effectively and protect both Malaysia’s sovereignty and the wellbeing of its coastal communities.

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